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SONS OF DIVES.

SONS OF DIVES.

A Novel.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON :

SAMUEL TINSLEY, 34, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND.

1872.

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SONS OF DIVES.

CHAPTER I.

LIFE IN THE WEST.

Words are like leaves : and where they most abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.

POPE.

“ **V**ERY kind and thoughtful indeed of
dear Lady Standish. Listen to this,
Isabel :—

“ **M**Y DEAR MRS. VERNON,—We were delighted to
hear so good a report of you after your late dissipation.
As you say, the season may be said to be over, and the
weather having set in with such tropical heat, we think
you will not be sorry to leave town ; so I venture to
propose that you and Miss Vernon should join us here as

soon as it suits you, and we hope that you will not make any plans that will deprive us of a long visit. We expect a large party of mutual friends. Sir Thomas is impatient to renew his flirtations with your charming Isabel.

“Yours sincerely,

“HELEN STANDISH.

“STANDISH PARK, WINDSOR,

“*July 1st, 1854.*”

“My dear, this letter came just after you went out riding this morning, but I forgot all about it till now. Really, my nerves have been so shaken--shattered I may say—at seeing you brought home such an object in that dreadful cab, with your habit torn to ribbons and your hair all down your back, that everything of importance went out of my head, and I have felt like somebody else ever since. Now I begin to remember I was to have told Smart to do up my point-lace head-dress with the Indian butterflies, and to send to Madame Fleurette to say that you have changed your mind and will not have the blue glacé silk just now; but

my dear child, after all, how very fortunate it is that it all happened! I don't mean your habit being spoilt, nor that sad bruise on your shoulder (I do trust it may not turn green and yellow), nor the poor sailor's head being hurt; (didn't they say it was a sailor, or a soldier, or a gentleman who saved you?) but it is a good thing that I did not send to Madame Fleurette, for now you *will* want a new dress, and that blue was just the shade for your complexion, my love. You have looked rather pale lately, and now, after this dreadful shock to your nervous system, a gay country house and the bracing air of Windsor will be the very best thing to restore you. As to that primitive notion of yours of ruralizing in some out-of-the-way village, I tell you now that I never could have allowed it, and I really think, Isabel, that with your attractions, and after the advantages I have striven all my

life to give you, it is only justice to yourself and common gratitude to me not to bury yourself in a thicket during the best years of your life. However, dear Lady Standish's opportune invitation has settled the question."

The foregoing dialogue or more strictly speaking, monologue, for it had been all on one side and had been poured forth without a pause, took place in an elegant London drawing-room, in a fashionable quarter on the Knightsbridge side of the Park, towards the end of the season of 1854.

It was a scorching, sultry day—a day rare even in July, one of those days which call up visions of sultans and divans and hookahs, and which in the abodes of the rich, with all the luxuries and appurtenances of wealth give an indescribable sense of languid enjoyment and peace; but in the crowded, ill-ventilated dwellings of the London poor, must only add restlessness to suffering, and

develop the dormant seeds of disease into the raging and wasting fever.

We have not now to do however with scenes of want or misery, where a stricken husband, tossing on his wretched heap of rags, in the corner of the crowded room, (that forms “home” to himself and his whole family), mutters in feverish unconsciousness words long forgotten from disuse, holy words, perhaps, confusedly mingled with joyous shouts of childhood’s days, and memories of green fields and cool streams, where he and his little companions were wont to launch their tiny fleet of paper boats, and watch them sail down the current to a favourite eddy, and there toss and struggle, and finally be wrecked. Little thought the happy careless boy in those days of innocence that he was playing with the emblems of his own later broken life! Nor, will we visit the stifling garret, where a wan

girl lies dying of consumption under the burning slates, obliged *at last* to give up the hard, monotonous, ill-paid occupation of “plain work,” or probably a less creditable mode of earning a wretched existence; her only refreshment the mug of tepid water on the chair by her side, drained dry long before the return at night of her only companion now, a girl who shared her garret and her sufferings, and was likely to resemble her in her death as well as in her life—alone, unattended, gasping for air on this glorious first July, when even on the London housetops the little birds perched on the unused chimneys sang their happy songs—the parched lips of the dying woman, so close beneath them, murmured “Only air! Only air!” Close not this book in disgust, delicate reader. It is not to such scenes of sorrow that we will lead you, but to a well-appointed house, far west, facing the south,

not far from Albert Gate. The tall windows are wide open, the striped outer blinds drawn closely down are ingeniously made to keep out the sun, but to admit the air, laden with the fresh perfume of heliotrope and rose from the well-watered plants that fill the balcony. The interior of this house, especially in the subdued summer light of this particular afternoon, was very inviting. It had at all times that air of perfect refinement which belongs only to rooms lived in by highly-bred and cultivated women. That absence of the gorgeous, the perfect harmony of colours, the mixture of modern elegance and comfort with the rare old relics of former times ; the exquisite miniatures, the old china, the nameless knicknacks which have not been “picked up,” but came down from grandmother and great-grandmother to add to the luxury of a modern drawing room.

There were few afternoons that the owners of these pretty rooms were not besieged with callers—for Mrs. Vernon and her daughter Isabel were favourites in the circle in which they lived—but this afternoon, although the door-bell had rung many times, the ladies had denied themselves to general visitors; making only one exception,—should Captain Erne call he was to be admitted.

Mrs. Vernon, *née* Margaret St. Aubyn, could count a long line of ancestors, in whom belief in the value of their descent was part of their religion; and from generation to generation, with two or three exceptions, they had been faithful to their creed. The result was a diminished estate, and a smaller and smaller provision for younger children; so that, when General Vernon fell in love with the waning but aristocratic beauty of quite thirty, Margaret's family were fain to be content with the moderate

pretensions of the brave soldier, who, if he had not inherited as old a name as their own, had made one, of which any woman might be proud; and to do Margaret justice so she was, and for the few short years of her married life she made him a good wife. One girl was born to them, whose lively affectionate childhood filled her father's last years with joy, and the old soldier's life, that had been chiefly spent in rough camps and Indian marches, passed gently away, tended by womanly hands and soothed by childish caresses.

The widow, weak woman though she was in most ways, gave her whole soul, and devoted her life to bring up her daughter to take a good position in the world as a worthy representative of her revered ancestors. Maternal instinct and a concentration of all her powers to this one object, seemed to supply a strength of mind as regarded all that

concerned her child. For her she could be worldly or self-denying, prudent or lavish, all things that appeared expedient for the girl's present happiness or her future advancement. Independently of this object in life, Mrs. Vernon was a well-dressed, lady-like, foolish woman, whose volubility was overlooked by society in consideration of her good nature, or the worldly advantage of her acquaintance, and also for her daughter's sake; for Isabel Vernon was universally admired and courted—amiable, cultivated, and courteous, her extreme beauty had not called forth the jealousy and criticism it so often excites, and she was a favourite equally with men and women. The world had hitherto dealt very gently with this petted child of fortune. It is said to be easy for a pretty woman to be good-tempered and amiable, and it certainly seemed so to Isabel. Wherever she appeared men gathered round her,

as eager for her smiles as their *blasé* natures would allow, and her young lady friends were only too happy to find themselves within the influence of her magic circle.

Sometimes it was rumoured amongst these latter, that some impetuous young fellow newly admitted to their set, a novice in the arts of courtship, and thinking less of himself than of the divinity he worshipped, had rushed headlong on his fate, without even making an impression on the citadel he so rashly stormed. Probably Isabel was not fully aware of her own power, nor of the pain which she unconsciously and perhaps heedlessly inflicted. Her mother, proud and confident in her child's attractions, and in her own manœuvering, had determined to accomplish for her, sooner or later, a high position with rank and fortune. With this aim she took care never to let her daughter out of her sight, and carefully guarded her,

from what might have proved dangerous attentions. The consequence was, that the stream of the girl's life ran calmly on with scarce a ripple to disturb its surface ; for notwithstanding the number of her admirers, she had been so carefully guarded, that they had appeared before her as her polite slaves perhaps, but with the reserve in look and manner that society imposes, and she had never yet seen a man tremblingly waiting his sentence from her lips ; willing for her love, to yield position, friends, honour, life itself. She had never felt the violence of a man's unrestrained love, a torrent of passionate human feeling, such as many women are not born to excite ; but *when* they do, surely its strength must break the cold bands of fashion or expediency that bind their conventional hearts, and carry them on irresistibly in its force, just as a little stream that meets a mighty river, mingles and loses itself in

its rushing waters, unconsciously adding strength and beauty to its conqueror.

Isabel had never known, had never witnessed, any strong natural feeling. The cautious hurried proposal, whispered in a ball-room from a face tutored to hide all emotion from the couple standing near, or from the watchful eye of a chaperone; or else perhaps abruptly jerked out in the ride, where for a few minutes the adorer could contrive to rein his horse by the side of his goddess out of hearing of the rest of the party, (and our Isabel was only allowed to ride with a chosen set of friends with the old coachman in close attendance), had sometimes for the moment captivated her fancy, but had failed hitherto to touch her heart, if she had one; and when dutifully recounted to her mother, had been dismissed according to order, with a few courteous but formal lines, and the victim was forgotten almost as soon as he

dropped out of the ranks of admirers, where another was soon ready to fill up the vacancy.

And so life passed smoothly and pleasantly on, and if it were an aimless, useless life, given up to pleasure and vanity, doing no good to others, few will wonder, and let none blame, who have not been born and nurtured in the same atmosphere of idle luxury and flattery. Another season was drawing to a close, the third season since Isabel had been “presented” and had taken her place in the fashionable world, and still the object of her mother’s desire was not accomplished. The coveted coronet had not yet been secured for her darling. Coronets are not laid at the feet of even the prettiest girl of the season every day, and though Isabel’s beauty had not diminished, but rather increased, other pretty faces had appeared upon their little stage with all the additional charm

of novelty. So Mrs. Vernon decided that the time had come when she must no longer trifle in the critical game of life, and she looked around her and decided on her course.

There was one in the list of attendants on Isabel who might and should be allowed to win the prize ; he had not yet the coronet to give a bride, it is true, but Mrs. Vernon felt certain that it would ere long be his to bestow.

The Honourable Gerald Erne, late Captain in the Blues, but now exchanged into the 27th Hussars, just returned from India, was the second son of the Earl Mount Ida. The said Earl was a very old man—the eldest son, Lord Clare, a confirmed invalid. Certainly he had been a great sufferer all his life ; but had not Dr. Kortall, the family physician, who also prescribed continually for Mrs. Vernon's nervous headaches ; had

he not lately shaken his head mysteriously, and more than hinted that the constitution of the noble invalid was rapidly giving way under the strain of prolonged suffering, which could not now last *very* long—and that there was every probability that the aged father would outlive the sickly son. The opinion was quite in confidence, of course, must not be mentioned, etc., etc.

Mrs. Vernon was not likely to talk of this; weak and voluble as she was, there was more method in her rambling than the world in general gave her credit for, and so she kept her valuable knowledge to herself, and decided on her course; at last one of her daughter's admirers should receive encouragement, and such was her faith in Isabel's obedience and fascinations that she never doubted of success. Many were the opportunities *now* given. On one promenade day at the Horticultural Gardens, when they had

given an admission to Captain Erne the usually careful Mrs. Vernon had found great difficulty in *losing* her daughter, for Isabel was so well trained that she never voluntarily strayed from her mother's side in public places, and was *exigeante* enough to expect all attentions and pretty speeches to be made in that watchful presence; but on this occasion Mrs. Vernon met so many friends, had advanced and retreated, and doubled so often, that Isabel and Gerald, tired of following her tortuous course, and really enjoying one another's society, had drifted on with the crowd, little heeding that they were losing sight of their troublesome chaperone. Then, this new move in her tactics taken, Mrs. Vernon sat down. She felt anxious, and quite determined not to see anything nor anybody, nor allow herself to be asked any questions; but presently as she sat absently playing with her lace parasol and

staring straight before her at the fountain, it became impossible to ignore the approach of a tall, massive, untidily dressed woman, whose faded pink bonnet did not show to the best advantage the large light-coloured face which it framed, a certain Mrs. Mullany, wife of Daniel Mullany, M.P. for “Ballycomeon,” who, enjoying the London season for the first time, found that her five ill-dressed daughters did not create the sensation she had expected—in fact, that it was a difficult matter to get them partners, or attention of any kind in public places. As the portly form drew near with her train of girls presenting every hue and shade of colour in their wonderful toilettes, she called out,

“And is it your daughter you are looking for, Mrs. Vernon? for I remarked her with the gentleman with the yellow moustache half-an-hour ago; it’s quite alone that they were, and I thought may-be that you didn’t

know it, and that it's I that would tell you, for I sympathise with a mother's feelings, and I shouldn't like to see my daughters going about with me not knowing where they were."

"O thank you, dear Mrs. Mullany, but I am not in the least anxious, for I can trust *my* daughter. Isabel always does what is right, and Captain Erne will take great care of her. I was so very tired that they were so good as to go and see if the carriage was there, and if not, if Lady Standish could take us home."

"Then the carriage was in the conservatory, I suppose," said the virtuous matron, "for it was there that I saw them," and she swept on.

Now if Mrs. Vernon could have stabbed her malicious rival, and hidden the great body among the orange trees, or thrown it into a fountain and felt sure that it would

not have floated, it is quite certain that she would not have hesitated to do so; but, not feeling assured on the subject, she replied with her blandest smile, “ You are so funny, Mrs. Mullany; how I envy your Irish wit.”

Her ordeal was not yet over, however, for now a pinched little woman of about forty, with thin white lips and a magenta-coloured nose approached, accompanied by an old mother who ought to have been dozing in her arm chair at home.

“ It is so rare to see you alone, Mrs. Vernon. I hope that Miss Vernon is not ill? ”

The poor lady’s blood was up from her late encounter, but fortunately she did not lose her presence of mind and told the truth.

“ It is very good of you to take so much interest in her, Miss Pite, she is quite well, thank you, and Captain Erne has taken her

to see those wonderful Azaleas, while I rest and wait for them here."

"It was her, then," muttered the virgin, and passed on. Mrs. Vernon would now have been very glad to find the unconscious object of such wordy warfare and to go home, and to her great relief up came little Major Swift. She was quite sure of his good nature; he was "the dearest little man in the world, just like a wire-haired terrier, and as faithful," Isabel used to say.

Mrs. Vernon at once relaxed as the cheery little man began.

"I knew I should find you directly, there is Miss Vernon in a dreadful state, because she lost you for half a second. I have been telling her that she is quite spoilt, and that she really ought to let you enjoy yourself a little sometimes; however if you will take my arm we will join them at the entrance where they are waiting for us."

There is no more effectual chaperonage against general admirers than the constant attentions of one man. The pair were now so often seen together that it came to be looked upon as a settled thing that Erne had won the game; and others began to drop off and offer their smiles and their bouquets at other shrines. As for Isabella, no one could guess at the extent of her feeling, perhaps she did not know it herself. Some said that “no doubt Isabel Vernon was charming, and sweet tempered, and all that sort of thing, *but* that she would never feel much about anything nor anybody.” In the meantime she seemed to fall so easily into her mother’s views, and looked so happy and contented in Captain Erne’s society, apparently considering him her rightful property, that Mrs. Vernon was satisfied. The favoured one could not fail to be flattered, and in his easy lazy way seemed

tacitly to accept his position, and was now the companion of their frequent engagements, or, more dangerous still, was continually dropping in to the afternoon tea so gracefully presided over by the fair Isabel; in fact he did not seek to disguise his preference for her, and the pleasure he took in her society, but still no word of love had ever passed his lips. Whatever his feeling was, it seemed to stand still, and latterly, if the truth had been told, Isabel would have acknowledged that in her secret heart she had noticed and resented a slight shade of indifference, or preoccupation that she had felt, rather than that he had shown in his manner; for indeed Gerald Erne was too finished a gentleman to be guilty knowingly of want of courtesy to any woman, least of all to the woman he admired. In person he was very attractive, tall, slight, but not too slight for strength; it was a lithe active

figure, but the limbs were well knit, and every muscle though not strongly developed, was under perfect control; with intelligent dark grey eyes, and light hair. The most striking point in his appearance was the perfectly golden colour of the thick silky moustache that curled into long whiskers of the same shade. I am inclined to think that concealed by that much-admired moustache was a mouth that contradicted strangely the rest of what might be deemed a manly, and certainly a handsome face—a mouth decidedly irresolute and almost feminine in its want of strength. The key perhaps to many a contradiction in the man's character. Perfect in attire, perfect in the intonation and modulation of his voice, in unaffected self-possession and refinement of mind and manner, it was not surprising that he should have been spoiled by women. He captivated where he least intended, and at thirty this

Phœbus was weary of successes. But even a life so seemingly bright had its dark side. It began to be known in the regiment that the Hon. Gerald Erne had long ago exceeded a younger son's fortune, indeed it was the hope of retrenching as well as the laudable wish to see active service, at a time when the inaction of the household troops seemed a reproach to a real soldier, that had induced him to exchange from the Horse Guards into a light cavalry regiment.

His money difficulties were becoming imminent, and those who understood his position wondered that he should seem to think of marriage with such a girl as Isabel Vernon, who, brought up with every luxury and indulgence, yet had no money in her own right; for General Vernon had left his moderate fortune to his wife absolutely, with the exception of a small sum that at her death was settled on a sister's children, and

it required the addition of the pension which Mrs. Vernon received as a general's widow to enable her to keep up the style and comforts which she deemed so necessary for her daughter's advancement. No wonder that Captain Erne's friends should be surprised at his seeming to contemplate such a marriage, nor that they should come to the conclusion that it must have been the young lady's general indifference that had piqued Gerald into paying her those unwonted attentions which he either never meant, or never would be able to follow up.

That the dread of bringing a gently-nurtured girl into poverty, and thereby increasing his own cares and difficulties, *had* withheld him from making love in a more decided way, might probably once have been true, but of late there had been another influence which warred with the habit of affection, or friendship, or whatever feeling

it was, that he entertained for Isabel. Could anyone have watched this courted man of fashion during the last few weeks, they might have seen him frequently jump into a street Hansom, and drive away far from the fashionable haunts of men like himself, pass the Strand and Temple Bar, far East, to where, among offices and warehouses, a small street led down to the river. At the corner of this street he would leave the cab and disappear, and each time the visit was repeated the cab had to wait longer and longer.





CHAPTER II.

THE FAR EAST.

You'll in your girls again be courted,
And I'll go wooing in my boys.

PERCY'S RELIQUES.

A MONG Gerald Erne's many acquaintances was a man named Morley, in whose company he constantly found himself in spite of an unreasoning dislike which he was conscious of feeling towards him. No one knew who Morley was, nor whence he came, but he visited at the same houses that Erne did, he affected an intimacy with everyone, he was not ungentlemanly, a good talker, a useful man, in fact, who always came when wanted, with whom no one had any particular

fault to find ; and yet some people felt towards him an aversion for which they would have found it difficult to account. Perhaps it was only the suspicion of those who pride themselves on being judges of character, and knowing in the ways of this wicked world ; but yet I am of opinion that as a general rule, no strong feeling of any kind is aroused without a foundation for it. If *you* like extremely the man whom *I* dislike, it is probable that you have had an instinct to perceive in him what I have missed ; on the other hand, if you have an aversion for my particular friend, (supposing you always to be free from prejudice or jealousy,) doubtless he has been wanting in some respect towards you, which authorizes your judgment of him.

Among very young men and young ladies Mr. Morley was popular, as a middle-aged man is sure to be when he devotes himself

to the fancies and amusements of the young. More than once Gerald had expostulated with Miss Vernon for her graciousness to this man; but as he never could give any good reason for his dislike, the spoilt child only laughed, and taxed him with prejudice and rudeness, and to make up for the officer's injustice, she exerted herself the more to be kind to "poor Mr. Morley." Certainly she had cause for her accusation when the day after an argument on this subject she saw the two men arm-in-arm in the row, apparently in such earnest and interesting conversation that they did not notice her friendly recognition. At that moment Morley was worming from his companion the secret of his difficulties, which pressed heavier day by day. He then gave him the address of a man "who would get him straight again in no time. An eccentric man, certainly, named Blake—Oliver Blake, a merchant, a ship-

owner, some said that he had been a lawyer once; but at all events he was a rich man, and would lend him the money he wanted—for a good interest of course—but it was not like going to the Jews; he strongly advised him never to go to the Jews, but to stick to Oliver.”

So Gerald forthwith found his way to Thames Terrace, to the place we have already mentioned, down that narrow street at the corner of which the cab was left, to a large old house, close on the river. Ah, what a companion, what a joy that river had been to one pent up for a lifetime within those dull walls! A silent witness of her trials—a sharer of them as it seemed to her fanciful imagination, and yet an emblem of hope. Month after month, year after year, ever flowing on, and on, and on, and she would picture it on further yet, going out from this black city, on into the country with many wind-

ings before it reached the sea, but *sure* to get there *at last*. And so sometimes when she thought she should go mad, the woman's weary heart was soothed and strengthened ; and reminded that her life must thus go on, and on, as long as God willed ; but with patient trust, and waiting, the time would surely come when it too would leave behind these imprisoning walls, and all weariness and sorrow, and flow gently on into the boundless ocean of eternity.

After glancing round him at this new world to his experience, Gerald rang the bell, the door opened by some invisible contrivance from an office within, and he found himself in the hall of an old-fashioned house, with several doors opening from it. While he stood irresolute, doubting which to enter, with his hand on the fastening of the one nearest to him, he started at a sudden burst of music close by. The grand roll of an organ played with no unpractised hand, and then the full

rich tones of a woman's voice singing with faultless intonation Handel's immortal composition, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." There was in the solemn words, and in the voice that sang them, something so startling and so pathetic, that a chord was touched in the heart of the fashionable trifler that had never before been reached; added to which the strangeness and unexpectedness of the occurrence confused him to such a degree, that when at last an impatient "come in" summoned him into the office, he had almost forgotten the important object of his visit, and it required the piercing and business-like voice and questions of the *quasi* money-lender to bring him to the necessary explanation. Having told that his introduction was through Morley, and given a statement of his requirements, a certain amount of ready money was promised on his bringing satisfactory security. As Gerald Erne came

out, the door was open into the room from whence the music had proceeded, and as he paused in curiosity, he caught a glimpse of a delicate invalid lady, (that she *was* a lady he had no doubt), supported in an easy chair, and a vision of beauty beaming over her arranging the pillows and soothing the sufferer in a low caressing voice : “ Yes, mother, again to-morrow, I will sing all day when you are better, but now you must rest.”

Hearing a step the speaker looked up, and their eyes met. Such deep-blue, wistful, loving eyes he thought he had never beheld. It was but a momentary glance, for good manners forbade him to linger ; but to one experienced in feminine charms, it had revealed an ideal of beauty that he had never before seen realized. The small classic head, the slender high-bred throat, the tall, graceful, well-developed form, whose every line was beauty—masses of soft dark hair drawn

simply back from a pure womanly face, which you *felt* to be beautiful before you had time to scan the features. The large dark lustrous eyes, the pure complexion with a carnation flush, that came and went in the rounded youthful cheek with every varied emotion, the exquisitely sensitive mouth, larger than a sculptor would dare to give a Venus or a Diana, with full well-formed lips ; a mouth that, inexperienced as yet in the world's cautious ways, betrayed every feeling of the soul within. It was a face that a painter would dream of, and that all men would love.

Such was the vision that met Gerald's sight in that dull city room—that followed him, haunted him, as he made his way up that narrow street, and back through the noise and bustle of the city, back to his rooms in Kensington Barracks. What change had come over him since he had left

them that morning—only that same morning, a couple of hours ago ! Was it all a dream ? If so he would willingly thus dream again—words haunted him that he had often heard, but never heeded before. It must have been *her* voice then that had sung them ? Who was she ? How came she there ?

Pooh ! what was he doing, troubling his head about a pretty face he had chanced to light upon. It was a pretty face certainly, prettier far than most he met, *but* a money-lender's daughter, forsooth ! *He*, Gerald Erne, who was courted by the beauties of every room he entered ! It must have been simply the surprise of the scene, and unexpectedness of the music that had caused him to exaggerate everything ! Away with such nonsense."

Nevertheless it was precisely on that evening that Isabel, sitting next to her favourite at a dinner party, first noticed a slight change

in his manner, which made her decide in her own mind that "Captain Erne must have a headache, or be very tired."

The next morning, however, found him busy looking up the securities he had to give, and he thought it necessary to take them at once to Oliver Blake. Arriving more quickly at the right street-door this time, he had scarcely rung the bell, when the door was opened by the object of his thoughts. She looked startled and disappointed, then quickly added :

"I beg your pardon, I thought it was the doctor; but I fear my messenger cannot have found him. My mother is ill, and my father is not at home."

She *was* his daughter then.

"Can I give him any message?"

"No; she could not give him any message," Captain Erne said, "But could *he* not be of any service. Should *he* go for the doctor?"

And after a little parleying and apologising, which Gerald would gladly have prolonged but for the evident distress of the young lady, she gave him an address, and followed by a profusion of thanks he rushed off and brought back the desired M.D. in an incredibly short space of time, considering how he had had to hunt him down from house to house.

While the man of skill entered the sick room, Gerald slipped into one near the door, and waited till he heard him coming down the wide old oaken staircase saying :

“ Perfect quiet, my dear young lady, quiet and cheerfulness; your mamma is much better again, and you must mot give way to anxiety. I depend upon *you* to keep her mind cheerful and amused.”

And so he got himself outside the house as quickly as possible, and Gerald slipped out and hurried after him.

“Stay Doctor! do you really think your patient better? I hope it is not a serious case!”

The Docter eyed his companion somewhat scrutinisingly.

“A friend of the family, I suppose?”

“I wish to be considered such,” replied Gerald.

“Then, sir, I am sorry to tell you that Mrs. Blake is a dying woman. Yes, sir, a dying woman. She will get over this attack—she has got over it—but she probably will not last many weeks; and then God help that poor child. She is an angel, sir,” said the eccentric, but warm-hearted old doctor, raising his voice with anger at the prospect of trouble coming on his pet. “An angel of purity and goodness; brought up with, and associating only with that high-minded and cultivated, though broken-hearted, mother; she is as innocent as a baby, and

as accomplished as the Muses. But what is to become of the poor lamb when left alone with that wolf, her father? Humph! good morning, sir."

And the kind-hearted doctor went off abruptly to hide the feeling which sixty years of wear and tear, amidst sickness and sorrow, had not hardened.

Erne turned back again westwards more and more possessed with one thought, and with the memory of one face. He had not yet transacted his business with Mr. Blake, so he must pay him another visit, and then what more natural than that he should ask the servant girl after the invalid, and so it happened that, as he came out of the office looking wistfully for an open door, or some glimpse of her who filled his thoughts far more than the bank notes he had just received, and which till so lately had been the most important object of his life, an old

servant came up and ushered him into the room of which he had caught a glimpse on the day of his first visit. It was a large, old-fashioned, curiously-furnished room looking on the river, with panelled walls, and ornamented ceiling and deep window seats. There was an organ and a piano. There were books, richly-carved furniture, and here and there in Eastern-looking table covers or curtains were dashes of colour that would have delighted an artist; but it was evidently used as a general sitting room. The mother was propped in an easy chair, and the daughter standing over her just as he had seen them before; but as he paused in the doorway the girl came up, and frankly putting out her hand said:

“Pray come in! Mother, this is the gentleman who was so kind to me yesterday,” and then Mrs. Blake bade him sit down, and she uttered her thanks so graciously and win-

ningly that he soon found himself chatting with his new and strangely-found acquaintances as if he had known them long, and on equal terms with his own set in Belgravia.

On referring to the surprise and pleasure that the sound of music had caused him, the invalid said “Sybil, my love, play something to ——” hesitating.

“My name is Erne,” said the visitor, at the same time taking out his pocket-book and putting his card down on the table.

What was there in the name that should make the invalid flush crimson and then turn paler than before? She knew then the instinct that had attracted her to such ease and unreserve with this stranger. She now recognised in him the son of one who in her early girlish days of prosperity she had loved as some natures can only love once, one who had been separated from her by evil tongues, urged on by jealousy, and re-

pented of too late; not till the proud girl, piqued by disappointed love, had given her hand without her heart to the first man who sought it, even to Oliver Blake, the city man, who, slighted and looked down upon by his wife's connections, had bitterly resented their "d——d pride," as he called it, by the cruel revenge of immuring his bride in his place of business in the city, and forbidding her all communication with her family.

From that time he hated the aristocracy with a deadly hatred, and made it his Satanic pleasure to lower and ruin them in every instance that came in his way. Through his secret agents the heads of noble houses should be tempted and lured on to debt and ruin; he was rich, but he would work and save, accumulate his wealth, and then some day when his countless victims were at his feet he would blaze forth before the world

with all the power of a millionaire, and dare society to scorn him, and with this end in view he toiled, and speculated, and saved, till making and hoarding treasure had become second nature, and the object of his life became lost in habit, so that the triumph so long delayed seemed as far off as ever.

Poor Mrs. Blake soon found out the madness of the step she had hastily taken; that the man to whom she had tied herself for life was utterly uncongenial to her nature, that the marriage bond was to her but a yoke; and that separated from all with whom she was accustomed to associate, she was far more lonely in spirit than she could ever have been in single life. She knew not of the wealth her husband was amassing—what difference did it make to her? she knew but little of his affairs, but only felt relieved that they absorbed so much of his time. In his evil brutal moods he would taunt her with

the neglect of her “fine connections,” from whom he himself had torn her, and had it not been for the children with which God had blessed her—a boy born soon after their marriage, and a girl some years later—she would inevitably have faded away for lack of human love and hope. She had contrived to educate her son up to a certain age according to her wishes, for Oliver Blake did not waste his time and trouble on domestic affairs. She had even persuaded her husband to let him go to Eton, where he had distinguished himself as much in Latin and Greek, as in boating and cricket, and when the time came for his leaving he was a fine noble boy with frank blue eyes and winning manner, the friend and pride of the upper forms, and the champion of the lower.

Then the proud mother, dreading the effect of the father’s evil doings on her son’s honest nature, tried hard, but in vain, to

send him to the University to prepare him for a good profession. Oliver Blake insisted on placing him in a subordinate position in his own business. For a time the boy strove hard, for his mother's sake, to bear all things; but as his eyes gradually became opened to the underhand and dishonest ways that were practised, he became more and more disgusted, and one day when he was about twenty, and things had gone worse than usual between him and his father, the high-spirited lad rushed home, and passionately clasping his mother in his arms, and covering his little sister with kisses, had gone off and enlisted in a cavalry regiment just sailing for India. Oliver Blake, furious at being thus thwarted in his designs, and laying this insubordinate independence of his son's nature to the mother's aristocratic blood that ran in his veins, vowed that he would never forgive him, nor see him again.

His unnatural resolve was never put to the test, for soon after landing in India, the regiment having made a long march through a cholera district, the name "D. Blake" appeared in one of the early lists of deaths.

There was no doubt that the father did feel the blow; but his grief or remorse was only shown by a more gloomy and bitter exterior, and by devoting himself more than ever to the main object of his life, that of making money and hoarding it.

From the day that fatal list appeared, Mrs. Blake was a dying woman; slowly and wearily she dragged her life on from year to year, longing intensely to put off her mortal burden to join her much-loved boy, but still striving to live for the sake of her devoted daughter, who had grown up more good and lovely than any parent could have contemplated; and now, on the day that Gerald Erne paid his first visit to them, as the

anxious mother noted the gaze of admiration on the face of this man who so strangely had been thrown in their path, the thought came into her mind, “What if the old love that had been so cruelly severed between the parents could be renewed again in these two! If she could see her child removed into the shelter of a home, for which she knew her to be well fitted, as the wife of such a man as this seemed to be, with what content would she lie down and die!”

As these new thoughts passed through the mother’s mind Sibyl had sat down at the organ, and after her hands had wandered dreamily over the keys for a few bars, she became rapt in the beauty of the music, and piece after piece of our great masters rolled forth. Presently, feeling from the perfect stillness of her listeners that they shared her enjoyment, she joined her voice to the instrument in a plaintive chanting melody,

till warming with excitement her voice burst out like the lark on a joyous spring morning.

Never had she thrown such fire, such tremulous tenderness in her tones. Even Mrs. Blake's pale-face flushed with astonishment and pleasure; as to Gerald, he sat enthralled. As each note fell upon his ear it woke a responsive echo in his heart, while loftier aspirations were kindled within him than he had ever dreamt of before.

“Sibyl,” her mother called her—a fitting name it seemed for one who cast such a spell over him. When the sound ceased and the gifted girl rose up, with glowing cheeks, and eyes like deep blue seas, her sensitive mouth trembling with the emotions that she herself had aroused, he could have fallen at her feet and worshipped her; but, instead of doing so, he thanked her for her “charming music” in the stereotyped polite phrase used by fashionable gentlemen to

fashionable young ladies, and the sound of his voice brought them all back to an every-day world. The invalid seeming tired he was obliged to take his leave, asking permission to call and enquire again, which was readily granted by Mrs. Blake. And so he did, not once only, but many times. Frequently now, flowers, sent as offerings to the sick lady, enlivened the old room looking on the river. Sometimes an afternoon would be spent in playing and singing, at others, taking up their position in the deep window-seat Gerald would read aloud modern poetry and light works, flowers of literature, which would otherwise not have found their way into the garden of this young girl's knowledge; and while Sibyl's eager ears drank in the tones of his voice, and her dreamy eyes watched the ripple of the river, her heart beat in sympathy with the loves and sorrows of the heroine of the tale.

And these, I think, were almost the happiest days to these two friends ; for in the retirement of their window-seat, at a distance from the invalid's easy chair, they felt as if they were alone ; and when the reading ceased, Sibyl would comment on the characters and stories of the hour with a zeal and unreserve that unconsciously laid her pure mind open as a book, to her more experienced companion.

They formed a striking but pleasing contrast, these two. The man's light colouring and easy, finished lazy elegance ; the girl's statuesque pose, with the sunlight streaming on her hair, gilding its dark threads, and deepening all the rich tints of her face and dress.

There was one day when the reading had ceased, and the harmony of thought was too perfect for speech, they sat and gazed in silent happiness, till Gerald idly turning over

a book by his side saw Morley's name written in it. It was an unpleasant break to the dreamy current of his thoughts, and asking rather sharply :

“What do *you* know of this man Morley?”

Sibyl, startled, answered: “Oh, he is an old friend of ours.”

Then Mrs. Blake roused herself and said, “What are you saying there about Mr. Morley; not exactly a friend, Sibyl, but an old acquaintance.”

“Ah! we fight over that subject, don't we, dear mother? I think it unjust to poor Mr. Morley; I always find him a most kind and agreeable friend.”

Gerald remembered another drawing-room, and other lips that had spoken almost the same words about this same man whom he so disliked. It was strange he thought that the only two women whom he admired should so

oppose themselves to his instinct on this point. Yes, the two women ! That brought Isabel to his thoughts. He generally banished her altogether from his mind when he was with Sibyl, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of the moment. Did he admire Isabel at all ? He supposed he did, for certainly he used to think her the prettiest and nicest girl of his acquaintance ; but latterly she had seemed rather too conventional and uninteresting. It was a pity she was not more like this unsophisticated beauty ; but then the men would simply go mad about her, and she would soon be spoilt.

The spell was broken for that day. Mrs. Blake was suffering and he took leave.

Thus day by day the intimacy grew. Soon Mrs. Blake became so weak that music had to be given up ; but she ever welcomed Captain Erne with a kind smile, and he was admitted on all occasions. He never saw Oliver

Blake, excepting when business called him into the office, nor did he know whether the master of the house was aware of his acquaintance with the ladies of his family, for by them he was never mentioned. The mother watched with gladness Gerald's growing tenderness of manner, and the deeper glow that came to Sibyl's cheek and lighted up her eyes; but still, no words of love had been spoken between them.

It may be doubted if Mrs. Blake was right in encouraging so unequal and secret an intimacy—if she was wise, even in her child's interest. But her case was desperate, she felt her time was short,—her maternal love overcame all other considerations. She knew no one else of whom she could think without a shudder as a husband for her daughter. She could not bear to die and leave her with no other protector than the father she had given her; and, if *again* she

failed in judgment on that most momentous point in a woman's life, it was not from want of consideration, still less from a common worldly ambition, she *thought* she was right, she acted for the best. And so it came to pass that, Sibyl, a guileless child in experience,—a woman in truth and intensity of feeling,—of nature far stronger than the man who was influencing her future life, was day by day drinking in fatal draughts of love, never doubting, never hesitating, never struggling against the intoxication, for good or for evil, for joy or for sorrow, her heart went out from her for ever. And Gerald? Did he love her as he ought to have loved to justify his seeking her out, day after day, and week after week, and weaving the web of his experienced attraction so inextricably around her? Yes, inextricably, for could he mistake in that honest nature the bright smile and dancing eye that welcomed his

coming, or the sad vibration in the voice that bade him farewell. The fascination was too great to be resisted. He did love her! Loved as he had never thought to have loved, for hitherto, the Hon. Gerald Erne, Captain in Her Majesty's 27th Hussars, had suffered from that complaint in a mild form only. "Why, then," my lady readers will exclaim, "Why then not tell her so, and marry her?" But ladies (who are of course unworldly themselves, and never marry from any motive but true love!) ladies I say are rather hard upon such men. They think they must be altogether heroic, or altogether immoral and selfish. The last quality I fear does apply to them, more nearly than I could wish; with few exceptions they are not altogether bad, at all events, Gerald Erne was not. The power of conventionality, respect for their own birth and position, the opinion of their family act strongly upon them, and

well it is for society as a general rule, that it is so.

Ye mother or sister, whose son or brother has made your heart ache with his reckless extravagance, and perhaps still more by casting himself into the merciless clutches of a professional money-lender, say, would it lessen your trouble that he should take to himself the usurer's daughter as a wife, and expect you to welcome her to your hearth? At all events, I am obliged to record that although there were moments when Gerald was *almost* tempted to defy the world and clasp Sibyl in his arms with a tale of love and passion that might have startled even her strong heart, he had not as yet any settled intention of seeking to make her his wife; of taking a money-lender's daughter to the ancient halls of his ancestors, and of introducing her to the lordly old earl, his father, as the wife of his choice.

Mrs. Blake had never told him of her own good birth, of her early history, nor of her love-passages with his father. She intended doing so, but the time never came, and the only result of his attachment was to make Gerald a happy man for the short hours passed in Sibyl's society, but restless, undecided, and miserable at other times, distant and almost rudely indifferent now to the gushing young ladies of his acquaintance, and their ambitious mammas; pre-occupied even in the presence of Isabel.





CHAPTER III.

THE WICKED CHESTNUT.

Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.

K. HENRY VI.

WE are now brought to the day on which this history opens,—to the afternoon of that hot summer day when Mrs. and Miss Vernon were awaiting in their pretty drawing-room the only visitor who was to be admitted.

Isabel had that morning escaped from what might have been a serious accident, but for the ready courage and presence of mind of a stranger. She had arranged with some of her friends, of whom Gerald was one, to ride in the early morning,

before the sun became too scorching. The cheerful, gossiping party had already been twice round the Park, and had just turned for a last canter up the Row, Isabel a little in advance of the rest, when a dog suddenly ran across the path, bounding and yelping round the already excited chestnut on which she was mounted. The animal dashed off at full gallop, with the brute of a dog after him. Gerald called out to the others not to follow, and all thought and hoped that it was only a little burst of play and excitement, and that Miss Vernon had her horse under control; but she tried too soon to pull him in, jerking nervously at the reins, which only excited the animal more and more; and, getting the bit between his teeth, with his nose in the air, the brute tore madly along, sending the soft earth flying at every stride. Away they flew like the wind. The poor girl clung on

as best she could, but the terror in her white scared face showed that she had lost all presence of mind.

The few passers-by did not attempt to do anything but stand stupidly looking on, expecting each moment to see horse and rider dashed to pieces.

Away they went—on, past the Row—on, till the railings of Kensington Gardens were just before them. Ah! was there no one to save them? By this time the horse seemed mad. He swerved for a moment, then rose at this tremendous check to his wild career, and—cleared it. With a faint scream as they alighted on the other side, poor Isabel fell, but not free, for, her foot having slipped through the stirrup, she was dragged along, head downwards, and must inevitably have been dashed to pieces, but that, at that instant a man who had been lounging against the railings started forward

at the imminent risk of his own life, placed himself full in the chestnut's path, and caught hold of the bridle. Over and over he rolled from the force of the pace, but holding on by the reins he soon recovered his feet, and the animal by this check having been brought to a stand, the man lifted the girl's body from the ground, extricated her foot from the stirrup, and then, staggering with the shock he had received and the weight of his burthen he looked round for help,—but no one was in sight. The nursery-maids and children had gone home, the gardens seemed deserted. So carrying his unconscious charge out of the more public path, he gently laid her down on the turf under the thick shade of an old elm tree. Then, for the first time he saw who it was he had saved. Ah ! she was not altogether unknown to him. He had watched her often as she rode by with her merry party, or reclined midst her soft

muslins and laces by her mother's side in the carriage. He had even enquired and discovered her name. From the crowd of fair women passing constantly before him, his fancy had singled out her gentle face for his melancholy thoughts to dwell upon, and to build romantic castles of what might have been, while he cursed the fate that had removed him far from such beings—far from refinement, and all that was worth living for. Now as he reverently gathered together the long golden hair that soiled and tarnished in the dust was tangled around the insensible Isabel, and anxiously gazed in her face, he thought that she was dead. Raising her head and supporting her in the most easy position he could upon his shoulder, he drew off her gloves, chafed the little cold hands, and in the excitement and agony of his fear that after all he had been too late, he pressed the cold inanimate form closely in his arms

hoping that the warmth from his throbbing heart might revive her. At last, it seemed an age of anxiety though probably it was but a few minutes, as he gazed yearningly in the white upturned face, his efforts were rewarded :—with a slight shiver, her eyes opened, and looked long and dreamily into his.

“ Thank God ! ” he exclaimed, as if his whole life depended on that awakening. After a long, long look, the weary brown eyes closed again with a gentle sigh, and she lay quite still, unconscious of where she was—unconscious of everything ; she had fainted from terror, and, stunned by the blow on her head, it was some time before the suddenly-arrested life could struggle back to its frail tenement, or the mind re-assert its rights ; but he now felt the pulses beat, a faint colour returned to her lips, and he knew that she was safe.

At that moment hearing horses approach,

he gently laid her down, and then turning and seeing the party of her friends who had dismounted and drew near, he went up to Captain Erne, saluted him, said simply: "The young lady fainted, but I do not think she is seriously hurt," and disappeared.

In the excitement of the moment no one thought of him.

"Oh, Isabel!" "My dear Miss Vernon!" "My poor dear!" exclaimed several voices.

There was of course great concern and sympathy from the whole party, every one asking all sorts of questions at once.

Isabel soon rallied, but could give them only a very confused and incoherent account of what had happened. She remembered clinging in terror to her saddle as the horse approached the railings, but nothing more. She had no idea who it was that came to her rescue, nor how it was she found herself lying on the soft turf in the shade. The

first idea that came to her bewildered mind was that it must have been Captain Erne, as he was the first person she saw when she became conscious, but that idea, welcome though it may have been, was soon dispelled. There was no one near excepting a nursemaid and two children. On being called the woman was delighted to give her account of the whole event.

“ I was walking along with the dear children promiscuous like, and had noticed a soldier standing against the rails very still and melancholy, and staring straight before him, and yet he did not seem to see me nor the children, though we passed backwards and forwards close afore him a many times. Presently up comes the horse and the lady a tearing along like mad, and the soldier he started up all alive now I’ll warrant him. Then over comes the horse quite awful. I dragged the blessed children behind a tree

and shut my eyes, but still I couldn't help looking round, and there was the young lady a dragging on the ground and the soldier standing right in front of the wild horse. He must have been mad hisself to do such a foolish thing. He was knocked down, of course, but somehow or other he catched up the young lady and carried her to where she is now. For my part I thought she was dead, and I was so frightened that I held the children close and kept hid behind a tree, for I thought what would their mamma say if they told her that I showed them wild horses and dead corpses, and Miss *Hemmily* so delicate too, and a trembling all over; as to Master Arthur he was as brave as a lion, and wanted to "go and help the poor lady," he said, but of course I didn't let him do no such thing."

While this long harangue was going on Isabel had risen from the ground, and all

now begun to be interested in the man who had so unhesitatingly risked his life. “Was he an officer?” The woman did not know; she “thought he looked like a gentleman, but then,” she naively added, “for my part I think all them big soldiering fellows look like gentlemen when they are dressed up in their regimentals.”

Miss —— now remembered that “she had noticed a man standing near Isabel when they came up, he was without a hat, and blood was trickling from his head on to his sleeve; he wore a regimental jacket, very much torn and covered with dust, he was very pale but handsome too;—but of course she was only thinking of poor dear Isabel—she did not look at him much, and could not say whether he was a gentleman; she had never seen a gentleman in such a condition, and so she could not judge; but still, she did not think he looked quite like a common soldier. How

delightfully romantic it would be if he turned out to be an officer! And his going off like that, without even waiting to be thanked, nor giving them his card, that Mrs. Vernon might invite him. He *must* be a gentleman, a *thorough* gentleman," decided the enthusiastic young lady.

By this time the chestnut, who had been trotting round and round, nearer and nearer to his mistress, whinneying nervously, had been caught and was being led away in disgrace by one of the grooms. A cab had been fetched, and poor Isabel gathering up the rags of her habit was sufficiently recovered to walk to it without assistance; gloveless, hatless, and her pretty hair dishevelled and bemired.

Miss —— and Captain Erne accompanied her, and soon she was given over to her mother's care. The wise matron immediately put her to bed, having first hurriedly heard

the story of the accident from Gerald, and begged him to be sure to find out who was her daughter's "preserver," and to call and tell her everything later in the day.

Now it happened that though Captain Erne had said nothing to the rest of the party he had seen at a glance that the man who had so opportunely been by at the time of Miss Vernon's accident was a trooper; his face was familiar to him, and though in his dilapidated condition the distinguishing marks of his uniform were almost unrecognisable, he had scarcely any doubt that he was actually a man of his own regiment. So, after escorting Miss — to her front door, he went straight to barracks, and there, as he expected, he found the hero of the morning, faint and haggard, his head badly cut. After commending him for his conduct as slightly as one man does another (be he inferior or equal) for a service done to a lady,

and ordering the surgeon to attend to his hurt, he considered he had done all that he could, and dismissing the subject from his mind, he looked at his watch, and seeing that it was still early in the day, and that he was not to return to Mrs. Vernon before the afternoon, he read his letters and transacted a little military business, needful from fresh orders having come for changing their quarters from Kensington to Hounslow on the morrow. Then jumping into a Hansom drove off along the now familiar streets to Thames Terrace.

The regiment was going farther away. What were his real intentions towards this bright creature, whom day after day he sought out in her retired home? Conscience whispered that he should decide on some course, and act upon it. How could he act on it? Ask her to marry him? No, he could not. What would his family say? It

would *not do*. Give her up and never see her again? That seemed equally impossible. He had never been used to thwart his own inclinations and do what was disagreeable, so he hastily decided that he would not think about it—at all events not to-day—he would banish such painful reflections from the pleasure of seeing her to-day, and afterwards he would think seriously on the subject.

“ Think seriously on the subject!” Aye, men think seriously on such subjects when it is too late—when there is no course left without wronging *some one*. They will move heaven and earth, hesitate at nothing; devote themselves, their time, their all, to win the love of a woman, whom either they cannot claim before the world, or whom, for some worldly reason, they *think* they cannot acknowledge openly; they teach her to despise her old life, to live only in theirs; they light a fire in her heart that will burn and

consume the hopes and prospects of a whole life; and *then*, forsooth, they begin to think seriously on the subject!

As Erne glanced up at the darkened windows where dwelt the object of his unwelcome reflections, he knew that the dreaded day had come. He rang softly and timidly, as one does ring at a door where Death is, as if that dread sleep could even yet be disturbed by the sounds of earth. The servant-girl told him that "Mrs. Blake had died that morning, that 'master' had shut himself up in the sitting-room, and was not to be disturbed on no account, and that Miss Sibyl would not leave her mother's room, and took on awful. He could, perhaps, see Mrs. Carr, the old maid and nurse; but she, too, was very much put about." Then Gerald hesitating, half dreading the scene of sorrow he might see in that house of mourning, half dreading himself, wrote on his card

“Let me know if I can be of any use ; ” left it “for Miss Blake,” and giving the girl half-a-sovereign, turned away with an aching heart to make his way back to the West, and keep his promise to Mrs. Vernon.

Oh, blind Fate, cruel goddess ! that takes us by the hand and leads us away from our happiness !

Within those dingy walls from which Captain Erne turned away, in a room suffocating with the summer’s heat, and the faint odour inseparable from sickness, on an old-fashioned four-post bedstead, with dark moreen hangings, lay what had so lately been his kind and gentle friend. The worn delicate face looked young again now that the vexing “spirit was not there.”

“Before Decay’s effacing fingers
Have swept the lines where Beauty lingers
* * * * *

So fair, so calm, so softly seal’d
The first, last look by Death reveal’d.”

The common household sounds were all hushed on this “first day of death.” The awful stillness was broken only by the wild sobs, now sinking to pitiful moaning, of the poor child kneeling by the bedside, and for the first time in her life calling upon her mother’s love in vain: “Oh! mother, mother, speak to me! Do not leave me so lonely, mother!”

So lonely, indeed. No one came to lead her away, nor soothe the intensity of her youthful grief. The parent who should have watched over her in that desolate hour was selfishly absorbed in the contemplation of his own loss.

Could Gerald have seen this picture of sorrow, would he have turned away? Could he have known the strength of that young loving heart, the intense womanliness of nature, added to all that was intellectual and ennobling, which made her outward loveliness

but a shadowing forth of inward beauty—could he have known the wealth of love that might *then* have been his, would he not have been content to give up friends and family, if need be, to cast away the conventionalities of life for evermore, and have deemed himself rich in his possession?

Ah! if men *could but know* when earth's best blessing is within their reach! It is not for many. The pure virgin gold is rare. There is so much counterfeit, so much alloy, what wonder that they mistake what they see, and think they have found it when they have not. Alas! for the man who has held the treasure in his hand, and has not grasped it! It is poured out on the ground and wasted. It can never be to another what it would have been to him; for I hold that however fine and pure a single nature is, it is incomplete without its proper mate. When two kindred spirits find each other, then they

taste a happiness that is scarcely of this lower world, they expand and develop a perfect unity, and God's purpose is fulfilled. But, how rare is this affinity! How often are two lives spoilt by want of instinctive sympathy between them. It matters not that each has a noble nature; if they do not suit each other, it is all in vain. Each remains blind and dull to the other's merit, and each spirit wanders on alone to the end, secretly yearning for its soul's mate.





CHAPTER IV.

ISABEL VERNON.

I had a dream which was not all a dream.

BYRON.

WHILE death was busy in Thames Terrace, and poor Gerald was retracing his steps after his fruitless expedition eastwards, battling with his conflicting feelings, sometimes thinking he would yield to the promptings of his heart, and then congratulating himself that the regiment was ordered away from town and that he would be further removed from temptation ; one minute thinking of Sibyl's loving eyes looking so trustingly in his, and the next reminding himself that after all he had never

really spoken of his love to her;—Miss Vernon lay passively in her pretty French bed with the white lace curtains trimmed with blue ribbons, while her mother gave strict orders for silence in the house that her darling might rest and recover from “the shock that her nervous system had sustained.”

At first the wide-open brown eyes were very wakeful, but after a little while they closed, and Isabel slept. For a time she tossed restlessly and muttered, evidently the consequence of the excitement she had suffered. She afterwards described that she dreamt that she was Mazeppa tied on the wild horse and galloping through deserts, and across streams pursued by wild dogs; but whoever had strapped her on had done it so badly that her great fear was that she would fall off and become the prey of her pursuers,—be torn to pieces by the dogs.

But on she galloped for hundreds of miles through strange countries, till at last the horse, reeling with exhaustion, jumped down a precipice; they fell crushed up together, and she, Mazeppa, thought that she was dead, and that there they laid many hours, till at last she was sensible of the air being filled with busy fairy hands, that untied her and bore her along to a beautiful garden, and laid her down on a mossy couch, and fanned her gently and lovingly till she came to herself again; but still could see nothing. Then she heard Gerald Erne close beside her say “Thank God,” in a voice far more earnest than she had ever heard before, and she put out her hand and opened her eyes to see him, and . . . there she was, in her own comfortable, fresh-looking bed. She could not understand it all, and was too tired to try, and so she closed her eyes again, and this time fell into a calm, restoring sleep

for some hours, never waking till, towards afternoon ; the sun streaming through the window disturbed her, and exclaiming that she was quite rested, "Quite well, mamma," she insisted on getting up, "for I want to see Captain Erne when he calls, to ask him all about my accident," she added.

Mrs. Vernon yielded to so satisfactory an argument, and mentally decided that the pair should to-day be left to themselves, and that there could be little doubt but that after the exciting occurrence of the morning Gerald Erne would no longer be able to repress his pent-up feelings, and that the day of her child's merciful escape would also prove that of her happy engagement. And so Isabel was dressed with even more than usual care, and very pretty she looked, in a cloud of hazy blue muslin, her golden hair once more arranged according to the last fashion, her small perfect features somewhat

paler than usual to-day (though she never had more than the faintest tinge of colour in her cheeks) and the soft brown eyes gazing out of window (the view must have been a mental one as the blinds were drawn down we remember), with a far-off expression, and a feeling which was quite new to that fashionable face.

A background of large plants in great china pots, an orange tree in fruit and flower, myrtles in full blossom, and a profusion of damask roses framed a picture, which would have enchanted a Hunt or a Millais, and which was very pleasant to a less artistic eye.

“Surely Gerald Erne must be fascinated to-day,” thought Mrs. Vernon as she looked up at her daughter after the long harangue at the beginning of this book; to which Isabel, in the easiest of lounging chairs, with a book upside down on her lap, appeared to

be dutifully listening, though in reality she did not hear a word.

It was late in the afternoon before Captain Erne was announced. He looked worn and out of spirits, but after some strong tea poured out for him and Isabel (by Mrs. Vernon to-day) into cups of lovely "rose Du Barry," he recovered himself a little, and soon yielding to the soothing influence of this genial atmosphere he began to unfold his tale in answer to Mrs. Vernon's fifty questions respecting "Isabel's preserver," as she insisted on calling him. "Yes, he had traced him without difficulty. His name is "Duncan Meredith."

"A charming name," broke in the voluble lady, "Duncan is so noble, and Meredith, Meredith? . . . what do I remember of the Merediths? Ah yes when I was a little child Captain Erne, quite a little child, there were some Merediths who used to visit at

our house. A good old family, too, I believe. They used to come in a yellow chariot with four grays, and there was a little girl of my own age, and one day in particular I remember we quarrelled over our dolls. I liked one that was new and pretty, and I wanted a doll's party, while she would insist upon having the battered one, because she said it must be unhappy, and must be petted and nursed; and so we could not play together."

"That is a very interesting fact," drawled Gerald wearily, "but you must bring down your ideas, I fear, Mrs. Vernon, for there can be no connection between your Merediths and this man, Duncan Meredith, who turns out to be neither more nor less than a trooper of my own regiment."

(There is no doubt that Isabel's nerves had not recovered from the shock of the morning's accident, for here she blushed violently).

“ The man’s face was familiar to me,” continued Gerald, “ and though I know but little of him personally I have heard a good deal about him from my friend Bob Hetherington, in whose troop he is. He has often told me what an extraordinary fellow this Meredith is—the prodigies of valour he performed in India—and that while executing all his duties with scrupulous care he will associate as little as possible with his comrades, and when off duty he is a silent reserved man. Hetherington is quite soft about the fellow, and our Major (Swift, you know,) is nearly as bad. They would talk by the hour if any one would listen to them, of how, after a hot day’s march in India they have seen him sit up all night nursing sick women and children, how he was always to be found at death beds, prescribing like a doctor and talking like a parson; but, as I said, Bob and Swift are foolish on the subject. I believe

they consider the man to be a hero, or a prince in disguise, instead of a trooper in Her Majesty's Royal 27th Hussars.

Something in the tone of Gerald's words grated upon Isabel. However uncalled-for and inopportune it may have been, a question presented itself to her that had troubled her more than once, “Was it love or friendship that she felt for Captain Erne?” We do not know that she was able to answer it any better to-day than before, but she asked him, “Was this poor trooper hurt? She should never forget the courage and presence of mind that had saved her life, and she should like to thank him.”

“Well, he did seem shaken a good deal, and had rather an ugly cut on his head, but it was done in a good cause, and no doubt he will be all right again directly. As to ‘courage,’ you ladies always seem so surprised if a man shows ordinary pluck.

All men are courageous if they have the opportunity."

"I must have passed a good many men I fancy before I fortunately met this one," said Isabel.

Mrs. Vernon, feeling that the tone of the conversation was not becoming propitious to her views, tried to change the subject, and was rather fussily preparing to leave the room, when Captain Erne called out :

"Oh, Mrs. Vernon, pray stay, for I must go directly (was he going to propose to *her* for Isabel!) and I came to tell you that we are ordered to Hounslow to-morrow, and to say good-bye. I suppose you will be going out of town somewhere, and I don't know where we may meet again, for in these warlike times it is impossible to say what may happen."

Poor Mrs. Vernon. Was this to be the end of all?

Isabel coloured violently as she exclaimed,
“ Oh, Captain Erne ! ”

“ This is very sudden,” said her mother ;
“ but we shall surely see you again, happen
what may. We are going down to Stan-
dish Park, and that is not so very far from
Hounslow.”

“ I am delighted to hear that,” said Erne.
“ I thought it might be so. Lady Standish
has also invited me. I am not sure whether
I can get leave to stay there altogether, but
I shall be over as much as possible. When
do you go ? ”

“ I think we can be ready in a week or ten
days, Isabel ? ”

“ Certainly, we are ready now,” said
Isabel ; “ let us get out of this baking,
dusty city, as soon as possible. I am long-
ing for the shade of Lady Standish’s garden,
and the rest of her presence which always
does me good.”

“But, my dear, there is Mrs. Monckton’s dinner on Friday, and Lady Bantam’s ball on Monday week, and——”

“Oh, mamma, pray stop. The dinner I suppose we must go to, but as to the ball I positively decline to dance again in London this season.”

So it was settled that they should leave town that day week.

Captain Erne said that soon after they might expect him to appear at Standish Park, “and about your hero, Miss Vernon, you cannot very well see him now, but I will send Duncan Meredith out to Standish one day with a note to be delivered into your hands only, and then he can receive his reward in your thanks. I confess I should not like to offer the man any other kind of compensation, though he *is* only a trooper. *Au révoir.*”



CHAPTER V.

STANDISH OF STANDISH.

“Though her mien carries much more invitation than command, to behold her is an immediate check to loose behaviour : to love her was a liberal education.”

THE TATLER.

IT was about a fortnight after the events of the foregoing chapter, in the middle of July, 1854, that Standish Park, the ancient house of the Standishes, (who boasted of a descent through the female line from William le Scrope, who suffered attainder in the reign of Richard II., in 1399,) was looking its best.

The house was a curious and venerable building, without great architectural beauties, but so very respectable in its well-preserved

old age, and made so very comfortable by Sir Thomas Standish, its present owner, that it had earned the reputation of being “a charming place,” and so it was. First of all, it stood in a grand position, commanding views of Windsor Castle, a peep of Virginia Water in the distance, and last not least, its own undulating English park; with its fine old timber, and grassy slopes, and far-stretching table-lands. It was on this table-land side of the house that stood in the distance, a picturesque farm, and rich pastures yellow with buttercups, where grazed and ruminated oxen and cows of the purest Herefordshire “short-horn,” giving evidence of the bucolic tastes of the owner, and each one a picture that might have gained a prize. On the other side, and this was the undulating ground, the garden front of the house looked over the deer park, enclosed in a high but very light iron fence, with clumps of trees in the fore-

ground, under which might be seen groups of graceful animals, lazily browsing in the shade, or, mischievously pulling down the overhanging boughs ; here and there two heads wrestling and tangling their antlers together, like idle children half in anger half in play ; then at the sound of horse's hoof or barking dog, the whole herd would tear down the slope with a startled rush, only to be compared to a charge of cavalry.

Between this part of the park and the house was the flower garden. Such a garden ! Ah, that was the crowning glory of all. Not one of your stiff modern mathematical problems, with hieroglyphics for flower beds, and paths of coloured gravels, too narrow for grown-up people to walk on, all fitting together like a puzzle,—the whole thing resembling a toy, without an inch of shade ; at best only fit to be looked down upon from a window or terrace, certainly not a place to

linger in and to enjoy. No, here was a real garden, a garden where Adam might have delighted to loiter with his Eve, and crown her beauty with garlands, and thick shrubberies where they might have hid themselves. Flower beds in profusion, masses of brilliant colour. Borders full of sweet-scented things that you might gather till you were tired, without seeming to lessen the supply. Fences covered with roses, flowering shrubs, huge pots of aloes, and foreign plants with impossible names. A jessamine-covered wall, and a lover's walk, with a honeysuckle bower. Nature and art seemed to have combined in an ecstasy of bright colours and flowering perfumes. Then there was a high, stiff impenetrable yew hedge, behind which, through slanting unexpected openings was a surprise. Another garden! more formal than the other. A mixture of flower and kitchen garden. Very charming also in its

way, with a mulberry tree, a square grass centre, and a sun-dial in the middle. A border of many-coloured hollyhocks grew by the side of the yew hedge. Quince trees and medlars, cherries and apples. Huge tufts of lavender and marjory, and sweet-scented balm growing together with raspberry bushes and other fruits.

Then besides the flower-gardens there were smooth velvety lawns, which would be nicknamed “croquet” lawns now-a-days, stretching away to shrubberies and woods.

It certainly was very charming. Yes, “charming” may be a hackneyed, and is often an ill-used term, but it is the right expression here—for this was a scene that charmed the senses ; especially those of the worn London guests who so often left their pleasure or their work to recruit their over-taxed minds and bodies. Lady Standish’s acquaintances rarely declined her invitations ;

the scene was pleasant to the eye, the still repose was grateful to the wearied ear, the sweet fresh perfume was refreshing after the gas, and noise, and crowded atmosphere of town; and it was an understood thing among a certain circle, that when knocked up, or worried, or "out of sorts," a visit to Standish Park was the surest and pleasantest remedy,—“better than all the doctors.” Whether the benefit was to be attributed to the enjoyment of country life, or the good wines of the host, or the ready sympathies of the hostess, or a combination of all, I am not prepared to say; but my private opinion is that a large share of the credit was due to the hostess: to her kind forethought, her ready perceptions, her good sense, and, above all, to her keen sympathies. Everyone confided in Lady Standish. She knew the difficulties or the love affairs of almost every man and woman who came under her

roof. The confiding ones were made happier, and generally went away not only strengthened by her sympathy and counsel, but half in love with herself; for she felt, or seemed to feel, with them all. A fascinating but dangerous gift: but Helen Standish was no flirt, and it was generally supposed that her good sense and strength of mind had guided her safely through shoals and quick-sands, where, but for such high principle and clear judgment at the helm, her little vessel might have been wrecked. Young ladies used to wonder, especially when fresh from the schoolroom, how it was that Lady Standish was so much admired, for; as they truly said, she “was not pretty and no longer young.”

She had reached that age, which young girls consider “*passé*,” and which has certainly lost the bloom of eighteen; but there *are* cases, and this was one of them, in which

a something else is gained which gives a woman consciousness of power, and an experience in using it, that leaves her younger sister far behind in the game of life. Although Lady Standish was not young, she was a great many years younger than her husband. At this time Sir Thomas Standish was nearer seventy than sixty. An ordinary, good hearted country gentleman, devoted to open air exercise, fond of his place and of his magisterial duties, fond of a good dinner, and of his wife, but wrapped up in his occupation of farming and his hobby for draining, which seemed as important to him as the work of a prime minister. He was always very glad that Lady Standish should amuse herself just as she liked, and have around her as many friends as she chose. So, although she certainly did not seem to care much for society on her own account, she availed herself of her privileges.

She used during the winter to devote much of her time to the poor, ministering through others to their wants and sufferings; but in the season she would occasionally go to town, mixing in the usual gaieties there; while at other times, she would fill her house at Windsor, with many a little scheme for bringing together those whom she found only wanted opportunity to make them happy.

No wonder that Lady Standish was a favourite; no wonder that people liked to go to Standish Park, where the hostess was the promoter of every kind and pleasant plan that could be devised for their enjoyment.

I have said that she was not young, nor pretty, but there was an expression in her face which made you forget to criticise her features, and she was a grand and graceful woman, of thoroughly good style, always dressed in perfect taste, and in the evening her beautiful white shoulders might have

been the envy of many who might more strictly have been termed “pretty” women. She and her husband were invariably kind and gentle to one another, and it was the custom among their acquaintances to exclaim at her enviable lot, and to say how admirably Sir Thomas and Lady Standish were suited ; at which she would gently smile and say “of course we are,” though there was one thing wanting to prevent her cup of bliss from running over that even the world could see. She had no children. Perhaps it was that natural but unsatisfied longing that brought a sad wistful look into her eyes at times, a look which prevented some close observers from joining in the chorus of the unusually happy lot of Lady Standish.

However that might be, if some blessings had been denied her others had been given. No one had ever heard of the husband and wife having had a quarrel ; she was patient

to all his hobbies, and if she did not feel a very deep interest in the principles of draining level land she listened as if she did.

It had been on the memorable day when Captain Erne and Miss Vernon were lost for a quarter of an hour at the Horticultural Gardens that Lady Standish determined in her own mind to invite them on a visit at the same time, and to give them every chance of becoming more to one another. Mrs. and Miss Vernon had accepted the invitation as we know. Captain Erne could not get a long leave at this time, but promised to go over to Standish from Hounslow as often as possible, and his room was to be kept always ready, and a vacant seat at table so that he might drop into his place whenever he found himself able to do so. Thus at the end of a fortnight from the time they parted in town we find them enjoying the pleasures of Standish Park, together with

several other guests who were accustomed to meet more or less intimately. There was General Talbot, who held a good post at the Horse Guards, Mr. Morley, James Paget, of Lincoln's Inn, Mrs. Domville, widow of an old friend of Lady Standish, of whom it was supposed there had been a romance in their youth, for it was well known that Henry Domville had proposed to the vapid girl whom he scarcely knew, in a fit of pique—had carried her with him to India, where he soon died, being yet very young in the civil service, and leaving his widow with two young children, whom she was totally unfit to bring up. Lady Standish had always been very kind to the children, who in return had a passionate admiration for her. She had tried to be interested in the widow—a constant invalid, who thought herself even more delicate than she was—and who now fancied the party at Standish

too lively for her, and rarely made her appearance, although the visit was a sort of *début* for both her children. Harry, a fair-haired, beardless boy, who through Lady Standish's interest had just got his cornet's commission in the 27th Hussars, and was to join his regiment at the end of this visit, and his still younger sister Hetty, a black-eyed, rosy-cheeked, merry, thoughtless creature, who was always getting into scrapes and incurring the censure of "Miss Standish," a niece of the host, who looked scornfully on Hetty's frivolities, and set up for being a superior order of being, devoted to politics, and what she called rational and elevating subjects. Major Swift (Isabel's dear little man) whom we met at the Horticultural, like Captain Erne, could not be altogether at Standish, but had his room there, and both these officers contrived to spend a considerable portion of their time with their

friends. The party was varied by a few of the neighbouring gentry, clergy, and officers from the Windsor barracks, being invited to dinner daily. The days were passed in driving, walking, archery, luncheon parties, etc., much in the same quiet easy way that most people like to spend their time in the height of summer just after the excitement and fatigues of the London season.

Dangerous days for the unwary. Many a one who can fearlessly brave the perils of a ball room or a *fête*, cannot resist the idleness and opportunities of a country house, and succumbs without a struggle to the fascinations of some fair creature seen day after day in her simple muslin or brown holland gown, and in the unstudied ways of domestic life. And where could there be a more favourable spot for flirtations or true love-making, than Standish Park, in the month of July, 1854, presided over by Lady Standish !



CHAPTER VI.

LOVE OR FRIENDSHIP.

There's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream.

MOORE.

M R. MORLEY was of Jewish extraction. Yes, conceal it as he might, in spite of his green-grey eyes, of his clean shaven face, of his plain attire, of his good English accent, in spite of all that a strong will and long training could do to conceal the fact, Morley was a Jew. Not one of that class, who in modern times, by the honourable, upright consistency of their lives, their generous acts, their well-earned position in society, gain the respect of all classes, Jews

and Christians alike; but a Jew in blood, without the faith and code of honour and charity of a Jew; having given up one belief without adopting another, striving to appear what he was not, the first to fling a stone at his own people, and to claim brotherhood with other men—and why? That he might lure Christians on to their ruin, and fill his own pockets. He had never known his father, who under an assumed name had wooed, and won, and then cast off, the girl who trusted him too easily; considering that he had made her sufficient compensation for her ruin by settling a moderate sum on her and her child, while he turned back from his brief passion to the respectable world and easy paths from which he had momentarily swerved, scarcely heeding, and soon altogether forgetting, the poor broken flower that he had destroyed and trampled on in his course. The woman, who, under happier

influences, might have developed into a gentle, loving wife, ignored by her betrayer, and cast off by her own family, fled to a distant village on the coast of Yorkshire, where, hardening her heart against the world that had been so cruel to her, she nursed and brooded over her sorrows with increasing bitterness, as year after year she found herself avoided and alone. For having resented all attempts at acquaintance and kindness from her neighbours, they came at last to look upon the strange, sullen, and half-witted woman as dangerous, and left her to herself. So but one channel was left for a vent to the wronged affections of the poor creature, and with all the undisciplined violence of her nature she loved her son. Not with a sanctifying, guiding, motherly love—she petted, flattered, spoilt him; but she left his selfish nature as narrow as it showed itself at her breast, she taught

him no faith in man, nor woman, nor God. So Louis Morley, as he called himself (his real name was Levi) grew up worthy of such training. Self, in some form or other, was the motive of his life. Gifted with a good address, a plausible tongue, and great tact and quickness, he had succeeded in obtaining one post after another that might have contented a better man ; but nothing succeeded with him until he made the acquaintance of Oliver Blake. They were kindred spirits, and it finally became a sort of partnership between them, though in very unequal proportions, as Morley depended from day to day on what Oliver chose to give him, a per-centage, as it were, on the sums that his villainy brought to the money-lender's pocket ; for he was the decoy-duck, who put on the appearance of simplicity and want of business knowledge, and went into society to help young men to get into diffi-

culties, and then sent them to Oliver Blake to borrow money at usurious interest. He was, of course, frequently in Thames Terrace, but he contrived that his visits should be at hours when he was not likely to meet his victims. Thus it was, that admitted by Blake to the society of his family, he had known them for some years, he had watched Sibyl from childhood; perverted though his taste was, he could not fail in a certain, patronizing, matter-of-course sort of way, to be fond of the bright creature, and from the day that the news came of the death of young Blake in India, he had made up his mind that when he tired of his present life he would marry his partner's only child; for knowing the seclusion of Sibyl's life, and judging of her feelings towards him by the pleasure she seemed to feel in his society, it never entered his self-satisfied imagination that *she* could have any objection to such a

flattering proposal as becoming in due time Mrs. Morley.

Thus with his future safe, and clearly planned in his own mind—for although he did not know the extent of Oliver Blake's hoarded treasures, he was sure that he was a rich and saving man with only Sibyl to inherit his fortune—Morley courted fashionable society, as a necessary part of his vile profession certainly, but also for amusement. Not being troubled with a conscience, there was no check to his pleasures, however discreditable they might be, and he often laughed in his sleeve as he thought how little these aristocrats knew *who* it was whom they admitted so freely to their houses. He boasted to himself that no twinge of remorse ever held him back from indulgence, no quickening of the pulse ever betrayed a weakness of his heart, he drained pleasure to the dregs wherever it was to be found, regardless of all

save that which would betray him to be what he really was. He must have been a finished actor, though I suppose none are so well trained as to be *never* off their guard, for I once heard a very silent man, one of the watchers of society, mutter to himself, “The cold-blooded villain!” and following the direction of his eyes, I saw that they were fixed on the thin colourless lips; the dead grey-olive complexion, and the still, lustreless eye of the carefully shaven face of Louis Morley.

However, during this last season in town, although the outward man was unchanged (it was curious how Morley always looked *exactly* the same), there was a stir in the inner man which puzzled himself. What was it that made his heart jump when Isabel Vernon called him to her side and spoke in her kind and gentle tones? He laughed at the bare notion that he had a heart, excepting the

particular part of his curiously-constructed body, so called by anatomists. He decided that he would meet this girl frequently; he would thus prove to himself that it had been either an absurd mistake, or, perhaps a fit of indigestion. And so they did meet again and again.

The result was that there was an upheaving and breaking in the man's nature, as where the boiling lava breaks through the snow-clad tops, which shook him in every fibre. He was furious with himself that a pale, cold, courteous girl could have such power to move him. "Courteous?" Yes he could not deceive himself; it was courtesy, and nothing more that she showed him. He became frantically jealous of Gerald Erne, then it was that in an easy, seemingly unpremeditated way, he continually sought the officer's company—that he watched him—that he wormed from him the secret of his difficul-

ties, that he sent him to Oliver Blake, judging according to the usual rule, that the enjoyment of a little ready money would urge him on to fresh extravagances and plunge him more irrevocably into debt and difficulty, and then should he ask Isabel Vernon to be his wife, he would have him completely in his power.

In the meantime, although Morley constantly watched Isabel, and nothing that she did escaped him, he carefully suppressed all expression of interest, he felt that Erne was preferred by her, and instinct warned him that an incautious word might banish him for ever from her presence. He heard of the visit she was going to pay at Standish Park, and although no favourite with Lady Standish, he had contrived to get himself invited by Sir Thomas, who met him on the day that the old baronet went up to town to the horse show. And now, during the time he

had spent with Isabel in the country, he had made greater advances than he had ever ventured on before, especially on those days when Captain Erne was absent at Hounslow, but as yet it had never crossed Isabel's mind that there was any meaning in his attentions.

He was a most good-natured, obliging man in her estimation, and it was pleasant to have him always on the watch to do anything for her, and to feel sure of her proper meed of attention when he was present; but *no one* ever looked on him as a marrying man, and she never would have dreamt of him as a candidate for her hand; independently of which it must be confessed, that Isabel was at this time somewhat pre-occupied in mind. She had never been *quite* so "*nonchalante*" and indifferent since her accident as she used to be. By some want of reasoning power she could not help

associating Captain Erne with her escape as the hero of that day. She knew certainly that some other man had been the instrument of saving her life, but she had never seen him. Gerald Erne had been with her before and after, his was the first voice she recognized, and his the first face she distinctly saw after her fright and unconsciousness. There was a little trouble in her heart that something was wrong, but she did not analyze it. Mrs Vernon, and indeed Lady Standish also, seemed to take it as a matter of course that they should be constantly thrown together, and she found herself always with either Captain Erne or Mr. Morley at her side. Morley was flattered and began to have hopes and to presume upon them, Gerald was puzzled and jealous. If he had not cared so violently for her himself, still, thought he, what right had that fellow Morley to dare to come near her?

Thus the excitement of rivalry urged him further than he had intended, perhaps, and the circumstances were becoming too strong for things to remain much longer in this state.

Poor Isabel at this time was unlike herself. She became actually nervous. Such a stranger was she to the real feeling of love in spite of all her seeming experience, that she did not know whether she loved or not. She felt, however, that a crisis was at hand, and she betook herself to consider the subject calmly. She believed that Captain Erne was going to propose to her. Well, and what then? "Was it a new idea? Her mother wished it, she knew. Dear Lady Standish would think it a good thing, she was sure, and he loved her she supposed, or why should he behave as he had done lately? It would be a good match in a worldly way, no doubt. Yes, of course, as to rank, the son

of an earl, but she—did she *love* him ? ” She blushed now as she had never done before as she asked herself the question, but answered it quickly, “ Oh yes, of course, she did, for there was no one else she cared for better,” and then she burst out crying and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Fortunately, this was at night in her own room, and there was time for her eyes to get all right again before morning. And then she fell asleep, and dreamt of armies and battles, and Gerald in the midst, and she was always there but never hurt. Again and again in the midst of the din she was saved from danger by his uplifted hand, for she felt sure it was Gerald, but she could never see his face. The sun was high ; he fought on against innumerable foes, but she saw not his face. Daylight faded, and faint and weary her hero turned and stretched out his arms towards her ; and, lo ! it was

not Gerald's face, nor any other, but only mist. And she awoke.

The sun was shining on the landscape and in at one of her windows, lighting up everything with joy and beauty, and Isabel, fresh and pretty as the morning, changed in mood from the night before, went down to breakfast quite like her old self. Gerald and Morley both being late, she made young Harry Domville sit next to her on one side, and Hetty on the other; and she chatted and laughed and cajoled till Harry did not know whether he was waking or still dreaming; and was so flattered and fluttered that he put mustard in his coffee, and cream to his broiled chicken, and it ended in his having a very unsatisfactory breakfast; while Hetty laughed and chaffed till the tears ran down her rosy cheeks, and Lady Standish had to say, "My dear Hetty! Really, Major Swift, I thought you would have kept Miss

Domville in better order; but I believe that you and Mr. Paget are worse than she is. If you do not all learn to behave better I shall be obliged to separate you, and to have little round tables like a restaurant, where you would only sit two together at each table.

“Delightful,” cried all the gentlemen, “provided of course that we may choose our partners, and I request the honour of your company at my table, Lady Standish, or else I won’t play,” said one.

“But *I* think,” said Hetty, “that the ladies ought to invite the gentlemen, and change them as soon as they are tired. I’ll have you to begin with Major Swift; but I dare say I shall soon exchange you.”

“I am perfectly content with the terms, Miss Domville, for if after I have sugared your tea, and salted your egg, and mustarded your ham, and cut up the rest of the party,

you remain blind to my perfections, I shall be glad to escape from so unnatural a being. I am only afraid that you won't be able to tear yourself away from me again for the term of your natural life."

This time Hetty roared with delight. Lady Standish and the rest of the party had caught the infection of the fun, excepting Miss Standish, who looked upon the whole proceeding as "very childish," and was "quite surprised at Lady Standish's encouraging such folly." "For her part," as she confided afterwards to Mr. Morley, "she was quite out of patience with that forward little flirt, Hetty Domville."

When Erne and Morley came down into this lively scene they felt themselves out of the game as it were, and silently proceeded to eat their breakfast, roused now and then to reply to a sally of the irrepressible Hetty, or to listen to Sir Thomas' voice from be-

hind the *Times*, detailing scraps of news from the seat of war.

Before leaving the breakfast room Hetty had engaged Isabel and Major Swift and her brother Harry to meet her in an hour in the jessamine walk. Lady Standish and Mrs. Vernon declared it much too hot for going out so early, the latter enjoining her daughter to put on a shady hat, "and be sure to keep up a large sunshade all the time, Isabel."

Miss Standish addressing herself specially to Mr. Morley, said, she "must shut herself up quite alone to finish a deeply interesting subject in the *Quarterly*, on the relative component parts of ozone and oxygen."

Captain Erne vaguely pleaded "something to do," and Morley followed suit. The fact was that Gerald wanted to be alone to think over his position. He felt that the

time was come when he must rouse himself and decide like a man on his future course, and not dreamingly drift on like a schoolboy. He must propose to Isabel—or—he had better not stay here. So, when he had seen Sir Thomas start off to the farm, and the ladies had retired to the morning room, Swift and Harry to the stables, (the bronzed weather-beaten major seemed to have taken a great fancy to the foolish, good-hearted boy,) and Paget to the library; (Hetty, who professed a dislike to this latter gentleman, always declared that his writing was a sham, that “so satirical” a man could not have gained friends enough to make a correspondence,)—then, Erne lighted a cigar and strolled off alone toward Virginia Water.

Alone, but not unwatched. Morley, surprised at Gerald’s not joining Isabel’s party, determined to follow him at a distance and see what it meant.

* * * *

I am afraid that our gallant hussar will be thought by some to be a very weak and undecided character, such as he was I am bound to describe, but I beg you not to be too hard upon him. Believe me, dear reader, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, he had not forgotten Sibyl Blake in the short space of three weeks. It was partly to think about her that he had now wandered forth alone, to ponder what he should do, what he could do. He had been up to town once since the regiment left Kensington on purpose to see her, longing to know how she had borne her great sorrow; but he had found the house in Thames Terrace deserted—shut up—left in the charge of an old woman, a stranger she said she was, who only knew that the family had gone—gone for a long time she believed—gone abroad she heard. He then thought that there was an

end to the romance of his life. He felt unreasonably angry with Sibyl for not sending him word that she was going. He forgot that the poor child scarcely knew where he was to be found, that he had changed his quarters, that even had she known, what plea had she for writing to him?—what authority had he ever given her for applying to him? His heart yearned towards her at all times, but what availed that? He strove to harden it, to take this silence and disappearance as an interposition to save him from a folly, from his father's anger, from a *mésalliance*, in fact, and possibly from a future of disappointment; for how mortifying would have been so close a connection with a disreputable money-lender!

It was after failing in this last attempt to see Sibyl that Gerald allowed himself to think more of Isabel, and urged on by jealousy of Morley, to make love to her more

decidedly than ever before, which had led on to a crisis that must now be settled one way or the other.

With regard to Miss Vernon, his father could make no objection, unless on the score of fortune; and if he himself could make up his mind to be satisfied, he thought that might be got over. He felt tolerably sure that Mrs. Vernon wished for the alliance; and as to Isabel's feeling for him—well, he smiled to himself as he thought he should have a good chance. *If* she refused him, why he should get over it; but he would not think of that, he would do it at once, and then—never think of Sibyl again.

At that moment as he stood still at a point in the road which gave a most lovely view of Virginia Water, repeating aloud “never *see* her again,” (he had unconsciously changed the words,) he heard wheels,

and looking round, there, like a ghost, called up to reproach him, was the face that he was vowing never to see—never to think of again. She was leaning back in a little open carriage, by the side of a comfortable elderly lady, driven by Dr. Martin, of — Street, City. All this Gerald scarcely saw at the time, but remembered it afterwards. The pure oval face, framed in the deep mourning bonnet, was very pale—very sad—changed, but more beautiful than ever in its womanly expression. When she saw Gerald, a sudden light blazed in the sweet dreamy eyes, and, with an eager exclamation, she half rose up and then sank back again. The good doctor had also recognized Captain Erne, and hearing her little cry, pulled up; but looking round and seeing her deadly pallor, he drove on quickly, and a bend in the road soon hid them from sight.

And Gerald? Gerald, who had just been

casting her out of his heart—out of his memory, what did he do? He was so completely taken by surprise, that, he did nothing. It was all over in a moment. He stared after the carriage in silence for some minutes after it was out of sight, till there was no sound of wheels, nor of the pony's feet patterning on the hard road, and then crying out “Sibyl, Sibyl, my darling, the *one* woman in the world to me, I will love none other,” he flung himself down on the bank, and burying his head on his arms, he thought long and deeply. How long he remained thus he did not know, and let us not intrude on the privacy of such moments. When he rose up his face was calm and determined as the face of a brave man going into battle. He had wrestled with worldliness, and expediency, and self-interest, and idle indulgence, and conquered; his better feelings had gained the mastery; he was ready to enter on the

real battle of life. He might not marry Sibyl—God only knew; he might never see her dear face again; but he knew now that he loved her—loved her as he never could love another woman, and he would not deceive any other; he would not so wrong Isabel, nor cheat himself, by offering the mockery of marriage without love.

He started up and walked back at a pace that on a hot summer's day would have half-killed any one who was not labouring under similar excitement.

Morley had followed him at a little distance, had seen the meeting, had dodged behind a tree to avoid being recognized by Sibyl, had heard Gerald call her name but no more; but it was enough to add intensity to the hate with which he hated Gerald. Supplanted by him a second time! He had no love for Sibyl, the slight feeling that he once had for her had withered in the fierce pas-

sion that had taken possession of him ; but she belonged to him, if *he* was indifferent *she* was to love *him*, she was *his property* he considered. Ah ! how dearly he had bought that inheritance, as he considered her, only his own guilty conscience knew ; and *she must be his*, in spite of the deep dye of his life of guilt, in spite of his mad love, he looked upon Sibyl as on a pure calm lake—a fountain of healing for him where, some day, before the end of all came, he would leave behind his old life, and wash and be clean in the waters of her innocence. Yes, in his best moments, when any gleam momentarily dawned in on his dark life, it was always thus—Sibyl was to save them, him and that lone grey-haired mother, pacing up and down the northern beach, summer and winter, up and down, up and down, year after year, ever brooding, ever pacing on monotonously toward the unknown country. Some

day, when the world had lost its charms, he was to take Sibyl to her as an angel of light to show them the way, and she would be their salvation. Thus when he saw the meeting by the water, when he looked on the girl's face, and heard the cry that burst from Gerald, he knew what had happened to him, and grinding his heel into the ground he cursed the man who twice had supplanted him, and who had shut out the only glimpse of light that ever shone upon his dark soul.





CHAPTER VII.

JAMES PAGET.

He brought an eye for all he saw ;
He mixt in all our simple sports ;
They pleased him, fresh from brawling courts
And dusty purlieus of the law.

TENNYSON.

AS Gerald, heated and flushed from his rapid walk, was making his way up to his room, he met Morley coming down to the summons of the luncheon bell, cool, collected, the same as ever, but for a dangerous glitter in his eye, while he exclaimed, “Why where on earth have you been, Captain Erne, and what have you been doing to put yourself in such a heat? I

congratulate myself on having chosen this hot morning for my correspondence."

Gerald slammed to his door with some not very polite answer, but soon after joined the rest of the party at luncheon. This time there was a place left for him by Isabel, who smiled kindly on him with some gentle rallying on his preferring a solitary walk to their company; but her observations fell flat, and looking up again she was struck with the expression of his face, which recalled to her mind the afternoon when he called to take leave of them in London, and somewhat disconcerted, she became suddenly silent. Morley, however, was in unusually high spirits and would not let the subject drop, chaffing and plying Gerald with questions so unmercifully that it is hard to say how things might not have ended had not Mr. Paget's quick perception discovered that something was wrong between them, and

come to the rescue—turning the tables on Morley.

“Now here is just a case in point,” said Paget, “of how little reliance can be placed on verbal testimony, be it ocular delusion or what it will. People say that you should believe ‘nothing that you hear, and only half what you see.’ Now I say ‘believe nothing that you see, and reverse what you hear’—for I should have sworn in a witness-box that I had seen Morley go out very soon after Erne, take the same direction, and return not very long before him, and yet you hear that he has been all the morning in his room quietly writing. So of course I am altogether wrong, and I should have committed perjury with complete unconsciousness.”

Gerald looked up full and steadily into Morley’s face—their eyes met—and from that moment the two men knew that they were enemies.

In that moment also Isabel glancing from one to the other saw Morley in a new light. She noted the momentary gleam of hatred in the glance that met Captain Erne's—for the first time she felt the sinister expression of Morley's face, and she shrank from him. Day by day woman's instinct was awakening in the girl who had hitherto moved through the world as a graceful lay figure, and Isabel was learning something of the passions and motives of human life.

Harry Domville never joined in general conversation, for the good reason that he seldom understood what it was about. I doubt if he knew whether Whigs, Conservatives, or Radicals were in office, or to which party belonged Palmerston, Derby, or Aberdeen—whether Sir Robert Peel had been contemporary with Sir Walter Raleigh, nor whether those celebrated characters had flourished in the reign of Queen Elizabeth

or Queen Victoria. He had a hazy notion that Sir Robert Peel was a jolly good fellow to have brought tobacco or potatoes to England, whichever it was, he could never remember which—if potatoes, he supposed they must have come from Ireland—“the pratees” ye know—which would prove Sir Robert to have been an Irishman; but, if it was tobacco, he couldn’t conceive where the clever chap could have found it. I think he felt some sort of interest in the War, for he was eager to join and be ordered on active service, and he actually read the Crimean news in the *Times*; but I am not sure that he had clear notions with regard to the enemy—whether it was Russia or France—but it made no difference to him, the boy would bravely espouse England’s cause, wherever it might be. What he would have called his “mind” had been hitherto devoted to dogs and smoking. He

was a first-rate authority on the subject of true breeds ; he had already spent the best part of his quarter's pay in advance in buying a prize bloodhound pup, that had yet to struggle through all its infantine disorders. Within the last fortnight, under the influence of Miss Vernon's attractions, poor Harry had begun to develop a taste for ladies' society, which might increase with opportunity ; but it was a silent adoration, and however eager he might be for a real fight, he was not yet prepared to try a lance in a war of words, and on the occasion in question he ignored what was going on around him, and made up for his bad breakfast by devoting himself to a *galantine de veau* and salad. Not so his sister Hetty. Always ready for mischief, and though sure to get the worst of it, ever delighted to oppose Mr. Paget (I believe the secret of her dislike to him was that he had once

called her “*l'enfant terrible*”), she was preparing to range herself on Morley’s side, when Lady Standish proposed to Captain Erne to go with her into the garden and choose a site for the tents at her coming *fête*; and the party dispersed to amuse themselves as they pleased for the afternoon. Carriages were ordered, and an expedition made to the barracks to see the new riding school, while others went to make a call on the head master of Eton, and to show the ladies the scenes of their boyhood.

* * * * *

James Paget was a very old friend of the family at Standish. Lady Standish always liked to have him there if possible, when she assembled a party in her house, for he was good-natured, as well as clever, and could always rise to the occasion. Of moderate height, and moderate figure, his only peculi-

arity being a squareness and strength about the shoulders, of moderately good looks, and very plain in dress (although the cut of his clothes could not be mistaken), there was nothing about James Paget to attract the attention or admiration of a very young lady, nor of any other superficial observer. The steady, bright, and rather deep set eye, the composed and *more* than self-possessed manner, with a certain comical and impudent expression lurking about the corners of a rather full mouth, frightened some timid young people, and offended the self-conceit of some others. They fancied he was reading them through, before he had opened his lips, and when he did address them in some more original speech perhaps than they were accustomed to from strangers, they suspected a hidden irony; and being at a loss for an answer that they considered sharp enough for the occasion, they were angry with him

for putting them at a disadvantage; and certainly those who, like Hetty Domville, were so simple as to believe that all the sarcasm, and hard hits, and want of faith in innocence and human nature, that bubbled up in his talk were the man's true sentiments, had some excuse for their opinions; but these were only the few, who either met him for the first time, or who were too shallow themselves to fathom the depths of such a heart and intellect.

To know James Paget was to like him. When once you had heard him talk he was no longer an ordinary man. He was almost always a favourite with men, and could always be depended on. He had more brains and more information than all the men coming and going at Standish, but it excited no jealousy amongst them, and he was the friend of all, excepting Morley, and the special friend of Erne. Those military men

in whom there is generally a curious mixture of simplicity and worldliness, used to find his society a refreshing change, and often gained from him very useful advice. There was only one weakness I ever noticed in him, and that was a want of appreciation, not of other *men* exactly, but of other *professions* and walks in life. He could not always give quite the full value to other kinds of learning than his own. He sometimes mistook simplicity for stupidity, and his practical legal mind was too apt to look upon a divergence from a certain groove in life as a sign of weakness, instead of giving credit where it was due to an exalted and self-sacrificing aim; and this was the more hard because he was himself so much beloved and looked up to by the very men who were unlike himself.

However, this error, if it may be called one, was generally kept out of sight, and

was more than compensated for by an unselfish warm heart, a keen understanding, a cultivated mind, and a ready wit.

At the time of our story, Paget was about thirty-five, getting on well at the bar, with a comfortable little private fortune, but he was still unmarried ; he always said he was looking out for a wife, but he never persistently made love to any girl ; if he seemed to have taken a fancy one day, the impression wore off, or was apparently replaced by another the next, and whether under the cheerfulness of his exterior, he was suffering from a disappointment in early life, or whether Paget was really hard to please, the world might form many opinions but it never really knew.

On the evening of the day we have been describing, Paget had scarcely taken his seat at the dinner table before he discovered that there was a chance of everything going

wrong again as at luncheon, and he determined to prevent it if possible, and his spirits rose at the prospect of difficulty. Who could be so agreeable as he when he exerted himself? Two or three guests from the neighbourhood had been added to their party. Captain Erne was still out of spirits, and not at all appreciating his privileges in sitting next to Miss Bullion, with £4,000 a-year in the 3 per cents. The cloud seemed likely even to include Lady Standish in its shadow. Morley was more than usually demonstrative to Miss Vernon; but she was silent and distant with him. So Paget exerted himself to monopolize her attention, to draw Gerald and Miss Bullion into the conversation across the table, and to cut Morley out of it, all with perfect good humour and complete success. Very soon the usual din of voices was heard, and all was going on, or rather “off,” as could be wished from one end of

the table to the other. Towards the end of dinner, Lady Standish said :—

“ I want to consult you, Captain Erne, about the arrangements for my fête on Thursday, I shall need your help very much, and especially your advice about the decorations of the tents. I want the dinner tent and the dancing tent to be quite different, of course. What do you say to my idea of a turfed centre in the ball-room, with a stone basin filled with real water and water lilies, and a fountain? I have set my heart on the water lilies. Then I have been planning a rich drawing-room tent, opening from one side of the ball room, for the chaperones, to be richly carpeted and festooned with draperies of blue and red to give colour. I must have plenty of colour. You know at this season most of the young ladies will dress in white, and they will look so much better relieved with a background of warm colours, and I

think that with plenty of draperies on the walls, my eastern drawing-room, and the green turf centre to the ball-room, I shall accomplish my object."

Lady Standish's rooms were peculiar for their rich colouring, but in her own toilette she carefully avoided it, generally dressing in black silk, or some *one* plain quiet colour, and she therefore stood out in the memory always as a distinct and separate figure in every group.

" My dear Lady Standish, you evidently need no *advice*, it will be fairy-land. I should be only too glad to think I could be of use to you in any humble way however, but I doubt whether I shall be able to come over again between this and Thursday. I meant to have returned to Hounslow early to-morrow morning with Swift, but as the nights are so much cooler than the mornings, and as there is a moon, I shall wait till

you all go to bed and then ride across, and be quite fresh for my morning's work. The very few things I care to take with me I can fasten on my saddle, or I will send for them to-morrow."

This announcement caused great consternation ; Lady Standish was really very sorry. Paget vowed it was too bad to desert just when there was hard work to be done ; that he had a great mind to "strike" also, unless Erne promised to return at least once to give his opinion on the preparations.

Isabel tried a little banter, but looked as if it might end in a cry, Morley smiled an evil smile, and poor Mrs. Vernon gave loud vent to her lamentations : "Oh, really, Captain Erne, this is very naughty of you ; I don't know what we shall do without you, there are so many pleasant engagements coming on ; and then there is that expedition we were speaking of. You said you had seen

such beautiful lilies in Virginia Water, and no one else knows the spot, and it would have been so nice all to have gone together, and to have taken baskets and tools and things, and have been quite rural, and the girls could put on their brown holland dresses and help you while we looked on. Isabel would have been quite in her element, ("A water nymph," whispered Morley in the girl's ear;) and you, too, Miss Domville, wouldn't you like it?—wouldn't it be nice?"

"Yes, Erne," said Paget, "only picture it! Miss Domville in a brown-holland blouse, standing up to her knees in the mud holding on to a tough water-lily, dragging with all her might and main, and refusing all assistance from me because I am 'so satirical;' a basket slung on her back, and your 'wide-awake' on her head to make the yokels take her for a boy. Picture it, think of it, and leave if you can."

“Pray don’t go on in this way all of you,” said Erne; “it is heart-rending; think what *my* feelings must be and spare me. It is a stern necessity, as Lady Standish knows. You will all get on only too well without me, I know, and I shall think of you among the water-lilies,” mischievously glancing at Hetty; but Hetty’s cherry lips had pursed themselves up into as scornful a look as she could assume, and for once she was silent, till Major Swift, next whom she sat, began with mock gravity, to make complaint.

“Well, I do think that this is the most wantonly cruel insult that could have been put upon a man. Here am *I* also going away a few hours after Erne (and during those hours I shall be lost to society in a secluded spot vulgarly called a bed), but no one mourns and laments over *me*. Mrs. Vernon, I appeal to you as a ‘man and a brother’—a—I beg pardon, a British mother,

I would say; yes, as a British mother—can I help it if my moustache *won't* grow long and yellow like a laburnum blossom? Is it my fault if my nurse put gin in my pap, and prevented my manly form from sprouting up to six feet eleven inches like a head of asparagus?" Everybody looked at the dumpy little figure and the stubby grizzled moustache, and laughed heartily, excepting Hetty, who, hurt by the observations on herself, and conscious that her childish volatile manner laid her open to such attacks, was more inclined to cry. She turned gravely to her neighbour, saying, "*I* shall be very sorry, indeed, to lose you, Major Swift, and you know I meant to have behaved badly again at breakfast to-morrow, and then we should have had the little tables, and I should have invited you to mine."

"Oh, well, I suppose it cannot be helped," said Lady Standish, "but now tell me both

of you, at what time I may count upon you both on Thursday, if you do not appear before, and how many dancing and ornamental men will you promise me?"

"*I* will promise you *one* ornamental man," said the Major, "the rest I leave to Erne."

"Let me see," said Erne, "there's Temple, and James Hetherington, Fitzhugh, Conway, Crofts, and Hope. I think you said you had asked Lady Hope too, and Hanbury, the Colonel and Mrs. Boyd are coming. You will have half the regiment, Lady Standish. Then there is your humble servant, and, if you will allow me, I will bring my little brother, who will be down there. Reginald is nineteen now, and rather a man for his age."

Then, Lady Standish being satisfied, the ladies rose to leave the room.

The dinner that had begun unpromisingly had gone off well. Gerald Erne had re-

covered himself in a great measure, and had been needfully civil to Miss Bullion; Isabel had roused and seemed contented—all owing to Paget's efforts. Lady Stan-dish gave an approving smile as she rose to make the signal for retiring. Paget, who felt that in his attempts for others he had gone too far, and really annoyed Miss Domville, rushed to open the door, mean-ing to say something kind as she passed; but Hetty's beflounced and befurbeloved little presence rustled by in unusual dignity, without deigning a glance in his direction. Later in the evening he went and sat beside her, and, without any chaff or joking, he made such an honest, simple apology for having annoyed her by “letting his idle tongue run on,” that Hetty looked up wonderingly and became quite shy. She eagerly forgave him, feeling more than ever ashamed of herself for having put a man like Mr.

Paget in such a position to a young girl like herself; but, henceforth she knew him better.

In the meantime Captain Erne had gone to the piano, where Miss Vernon was playing; he asked for one or two songs that were old favourites—favourites when sung by another voice than her's.

Ah, how unconscious often is the performer when, after being pressed for such and such pieces, her gratified vanity notes the softened, pensive expression steal over the listener's face, and she throws more feeling into her tones, more tenderness into her glance; how utterly unconscious is the poor dupe, that at that moment she is absolutely forgotten, that, though his eyes may seem to rest upon her, and his ears drink in her notes, it is another and a dearer face that awakened memory has called up before him, and the echo of

another voice that stirs his heart ; and that it is only when the sound ceases, and custom rouses him to praise the performance and thank the performer, that Miss —— lives again in the consciousness of Mr. ——.

Gerald asked for such and such songs, and Isabel sang them ; and then they fell into a talk—a memorable talk as regarded their future. It was not that anything very important was said, but there was a change in Gerald. His manner was quite as kind as usual—kinder, if possible, and more confidential, but there was no sentiment, no love ; he told her that his regiment was the next on the list for active service, that it might receive orders any day or hour ; but in all he said there was but the grave, calm confidence of friendship, not the anxiety nor excitement of love. And Isabel was becoming daily more acute to these changes, and understood. The lookers-on, including

Morley, who watched with jealousy from the other end of the room this long *tête-a-tête*, decided that this was the crowning hour of the many days of opportunity that had gone before; whereas, Isabel knew as every word was spoken, that they would never be more to one another than they were then, and she did not resent the change. If her pulse beat quicker than its wont that evening, she never knew whether it was pain or relief that she felt. As she laid her golden head on the pillow that night, she settled with herself the long-vexed question: “It *was* friendship and not love between us then.” But this admission was not made without a tear, and the highly polished and tutored young lady of the world began to think that something had been forgotten in her education. How was she to know “love” when she found it? If this was “friendship,” what could love be like? Possibly but a

fable invented for the use of novelists. Ere the poor assertion was half formed, it was contradicted by dawning instinct.

Before they separated and joined the rest of the company, who had retired to the inner drawing-room, Gerald had arranged with Isabel that, if on arriving at barracks he found Duncan Meredith quite recovered from his injuries, he would send him over next morning, on the pretence of delivering a note into her own hands, so that he might receive her long delayed thanks for the service he had rendered her; "for," he added, "if it is put off much longer, I really think he would probably never get that reward.

Then carriages were announced, and Miss Bullion, and the Rev. Ignatius Cope and other friends having agreed to join in the contemplated expedition for water lilies, they separated. Gerald lighted the ladies' bed-

candles, and waited to watch the pretty effect of their graceful floating draperies slowly ascending the old broad oak staircase, while more than one fair head turned for a last smile and a cheerful adieu, and then nodding a good night to the men and saying “We shall see you early at barracks to-morrow, I suppose, Swift,” he mounted his horse, and leisurely rode out through Stan-dish Park, through the town of Windsor, out into the summer night towards Hounslow.





CHAPTER VIII.

ONLY A TROOPER.

The still small voice of gratitude.

GRAY.

THE few days which succeeded the one I have attempted to describe, as a sample of the life at Standish at this time passed very quietly. The officers were much missed. Morley had been up in town. The General had been backwards and forwards at the Horse Guards. It is true that Mrs. Domville took advantage of the occasion to emerge from her room, but the languid and affected face of the invalid did not add much

to the liveliness of the diminished party; on the contrary, it somewhat subdued the vivacity and wild spirits of her daughter Hetty. When it happened that Paget and Harry were the only gentlemen guests, the former would yield to the request of the hostess that he would read aloud to them, and a pretty group might be seen under the shade of one of the old lime trees. The ladies on various picturesque but uncomfortable chairs, or else seated on the ground working, or pretending to do so, and Paget in the midst. He read well—he had a peculiarly musical and persuasive voice—and often as he warmed with the subject and the practised tones did justice to a cultivated mind, he brought home to Hetty's understanding some poem or play that she had never before appreciated, and the work would remain idly in her lap while her round eyes rested wonderingly on Paget's non-

observant unconscious face. Harry found these dull and weary times. At first he would sit apart at some little distance (where he certainly could not have heard the reading, but he could see Isabel) playing with his dog and smoking his cigar. But even these varied attractions did not often suffice to enable him "to sit out the lesson," as he called it. The cigar finished and the dog sleepy, though every now and then opening his eyes and fixing them on Isabel, giving a lazy flop of his tail, Harry would wander off in search of some more congenial amusement, followed by Rover, who would depart with a pleasant-but-wrong expression.

The morning after Captain Erne had returned to Hounslow, Isabel remembering that he had said he would send over the man Duncan Meredith to receive her long delayed thanks for the service he had rendered her, and feeling rather shy and nervous as

to how she ought to treat this soldier, and what she should say to him, she bethought herself that it would be much easier to speak a few words to him out of doors than that he should be ushered into her presence in the house, where she would have more formally to make her little speech to him.

So as soon as she had seen the other ladies disperse to their several morning occupations, she put on her garden hat, and choosing the first book that came in her way, she sallied out and took up her position in a shady nook which commanded a view of the carriage drive, and which must be passed by any one approaching either to the house or to the stables.

It seemed a long morning to her, as it always does to one who waits, whether the expectation be trifling or otherwise, and though her eyes traced the letters of the open page before her they conveyed no

impression to her mind, her thoughts wandered away to the confusion of that terrible day that had so shaken her: the fresh early morning, the sudden terror, the shock, the calm, the shade of the old elm tree in Kensington Gardens. Twenty times she looked up at the fancied sound of horses' feet. Again and again she went over to herself what she would say, it always seemed too formal or too familiar, and when at last she thought she had hit upon a happy and suitable expression it vanished again from her memory; then getting angry with herself when she remembered that it really did not matter *what* she said, nor *how* she said it to a common uneducated soldier, she forced her mind to attend to the book before her, and soon becoming interested in its story, she forgot why she was sitting out in that particular spot, forgot the very existence of such a being as Duncan Meredith.

While Miss Vernon remained in her shady nook absorbed in the loves and fates of some imaginary heroes and heroines, the man whom she awaited was drawing nearer and nearer at as rapid a pace as the hard state of the roads would allow.

On receiving his Captain's orders to ride to Windsor with a note that he was to deliver into the hands of Miss Vernon only, Duncan Meredith had at the first moment felt the wildest joy at the prospect of once more seeing the being whom he secretly worshipped; albeit as a beggar might worship the Queen upon the throne, so far removed did he feel her to be from him. But this momentary joy was soon succeeded by a bitter jealousy. This letter of which he was the bearer was no doubt one of love. Had not Captain Erne been the frequent companion of this lady? *He* was the one out of all the riding party who had taken charge of

her after the accident. He had been staying in the same house with her, and could a man do that and not love her? It all seemed plain to him; doubtless they were engaged and he was the messenger between them. Then a bitter smile crossed his face at his own ludicrous folly. Jealous! he, a common trooper, jealous of a nobleman's son. Striking his spurs into his horse the animal started forward at a hand gallop across country, then every now and then coming into the high road he enquired the way to Windsor, and started on again at a steady pace till they reached the town, when suddenly remembering his heated and dusty condition, and deeming himself unfit for the presence of a lady, above all the one lady of his heart and fancy, he selected a modest-looking inn, and there dismounting called for a pail of water, and having washed out his horse's mouth, he

groomed him and polished up his harness as carefully as for a review day by the commander-in-chief; then leaving the good horse to a feed of corn, he asked for a private room, and performed a similar operation on his own person,—washing and brushing the dust from his thick auburn moustache, and scrupulously divesting himself of every sign of travel; for he was going into *her* presence, and he remembered the soiled and tattered condition he had been in when she saw him last, if indeed she had seen him at all, a fact of which he justly doubted. Then drawing himself up to his full height with no lack of dignity, he replaced his military cap, remounted the black charger, and slowly rode on towards Standish, past the lodge gates, through the park, towards the house.

It so happened that Miss Vernon having finished the most exciting and interesting part of her book, raised her eyes just as

the horseman came in sight, and it is impossible that any person acquainted with art, and able to appreciate beauty wherever it may be found, could fail to derive pleasure from watching that approach. In the undress uniform of a cavalry soldier, with that perfectly upright military seat, so graceful in a well-made man, his classic head, well poised above the broad square shoulders, springing from the small but well-knit hip, Duncan Meredith looked the perfection of manly form. More manly than an Apollo, more refined than a Hercules, a very Antinous of beauty.

The sun gleamed on sword-hilt and chin-strap, and every salient point of horse and rider, as the animal slowly and proudly advanced, seemingly conscious of the eyes that watched him. This a common soldier! He was more like a knight entering the lists at a tournament, or victorious after combat

advancing with lowered lance to do homage to the queen of beauty. His keen eye had quickly discovered the lady whom he sought, and as he came near to the rustic seat, which in his eyes was a throne, instead of making the military salute that might have been expected, he completely took off his cap and rode up holding it in his hand. Then when within a few paces, he dismounted, and passing the bridle over his arm, came close to her, and bending low presented the letter in silence. Although a striking figure as he rode up on his charger, he was still more so as he stood uncovered beside Isabel, for then you saw the noble-looking head with its waving brown hair cut rather short, the large dark blue eyes that would have been keen but for a wistful look that came into them sometimes (and which had more than once puzzled and haunted Captain Erne, recalling some face that he had seen, he knew not

where); no hair about the face, save the thick but soft auburn moustache that shaded a well-formed mouth, where all feeling seemed to have been kept under control by strong determination. The accomplished and self-possessed lady of the world could scarcely have failed to feel some surprise at sight of the man who stood before her; but she did not evince any, and as the thought passed through her mind “What wonders drill does for the rustic,” she took the note and murmured some such words as, “Glad to have the opportunity of thanking you for, for” She had forgotten what she meant to say, but luckily at that moment Lady Standish came upon the scene. Isabel had told her of the visitor she expected, and having been on the look-out for him she now came to her young friend’s support. Isabel turned at once to her saying, “Lady Standish, this is the man of whom I told you, whose presence of mind

and courage saved my life, I believe." The gracious lady frankly put out her hand and answered, "I am glad to be able to thank you on my own account, for I, and all Miss Vernon's friends, owe you a debt of gratitude; but this is not the first deed of yours that I have heard of, Mr. Meredith." Then in a hurry changing the subject, for the soldier was blushing like a schoolgirl, she added, "you have had a long ride, pray come into the house; nay, I will take no refusal." Then at the front door desiring a servant to take Mr. Meredith's horse round to the stable, she led the way into the morning room, where, having introduced her new acquaintance to Mrs. Vernon, who renewed his blushes by her voluble and demonstrative gratitude, and minute inquiries respecting his health and his hurt, the hostess insisted on his sitting down; and so dexterously led and kept up the conversation, that the trooper was

soon quite at his ease in the grand lady's drawing-room. Speaking of the unusually warm season naturally led to India—(Lady Standish knew that he had been in India, and had heard much of his deeds there from Major Swift)—an inexhaustible theme. Then they talked of the neighbourhood of Windsor, and he asked after many families by name, much to the astonishment of Lady Standish who observed, “ You seem familiar with this part of the world, although you have been abroad so long? ” “ Yes, I knew it well when I was a boy, ” he replied, and then abruptly changed the subject.

Isabel joined Lady Standish in her endeavours to keep him in conversation with signal success. They spoke of the war in the Crimea, and even asked him many questions with regard to the allies approaching Sebastopol, etc., on all of which he had clearly defined opinions, and expressed them with

modesty, but with the freedom and finish of an educated man.

When he rose to take leave Lady Standish pressed him to stay to lunch, saying “If you do not care to rest, have some pity on your horse, Mr. Meredith ;” but the man colouring to the temples, firmly though gratefully declined the proffered hospitality, saying he must return to barracks at once, and with her leave would go and look after his horse. Lady Standish here rang the bell and ordered “Wine and sandwiches to be ready in the hall for Mr. Meredith,” and the gong soon after sounding for luncheon, the soldier turned to Isabel saying, “Have I to take back any answer to the letter, Miss Vernon ?” Isabel had forgotten to open it, but she did so now, and glancing at it for a moment said, “Oh, no, thank you, there is no answer needed,” whereupon he bowed very low before her, and then thanking Lady Standish for

her kind reception “of a man from the ranks,” as he called himself, he took his leave.

Oh! could that yearning heart but have known the wording of the letter it had caused such pangs to deliver, it would not have throbbed with such jealous force under the strong coarse cloth of the trooper’s uniform; but he did not know, he believed it to be a letter of love that she would brood and ponder over in secret.

Still, though he rode away a sad man, he thanked God that he had seen her, spoken to her, and had not been spurned by her; that she was all, and more, ah, far more, than he could have believed her to be—her image would be ever with him, in scenes of vice and temptation it would keep him pure and safe; she would never know it: but though she might never think of him again, love for her would be as a screen between him and the fire, and would keep him strong, and

brave and patient. And as he once more bared his head and gazed up into the blue sky, his lips moving in silence as he registered that vow in the face of heaven, a mist dimmed the eyes of as true and loyal a knight as ever sat at the table of “the blameless king.”

Oh! ye women of influence, did ye but know how men’s natures are often as wax, to be moulded for good or evil in your hands, how it is in your power to rouse them to noble and exalted aims, or to poison life’s purest draught by your scorn or your frivolity, would ye not often strive to attain to that high standard for which ye were created—to be man’s help-mate for time and eternity?

The letter that it had cost the trooper such pain to deliver to Miss Vernon ran thus:—

“The bearer of this is Duncan Meredith.” G. E.

* * * * *



CHAPTER IX.

WATER LILIES.

Down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook,
Her clothes spread wide and mermaid like
Awhile they bore her up.

HAMLET.

IMMEDIATELY after luncheon, carriages and riding horses were ordered to convey the whole party to Virginia Water, where they were to spend the afternoon ; and some callers happening to come early, they were pressed into the service of going to hunt for water-lilies ; so a procession of carriages and horsemen started from the door, laden with shawls and rugs and books. The carriages

were to take them to the farthest point, and then to meet the party at the nearer end of the water some two hours later, where had been planned a little surprise of tea at one of the lodges.

As is always the case the party had not long alighted before they found themselves separated, and divided into twos and threes, all making out their own amusement for themselves. Hetty, in wild spirits, here, there, and everywhere, becoming a very mountain of wild flowers and trailing tendrils that she gathered in her way, and every now and then dropping half her spoils as she darted forward at the fancied sight of water lilies ahead, so determined was she to be the first to discover the prize.

Isabel politely devoted herself to one or two of the strangers in turn, and was quite willing to allow Harry Domville to be ever at her side, so as to avoid the chance of a

tête-à-tête with Morley—for his admiration was getting unmistakable, and she was becoming afraid of him. Lady Standish generally looked after Mrs. Vernon and the feeble Mrs. Domville; but finding herself at one time alone with James Paget she began at once on the subject of Duncan Meredith.

“I do want to talk to you about our visitor of this morning,” she said; “do not laugh at me and think I am like those foolish matrons, Mrs. Vernon and Mrs. Domville, who made you gentlemen so cross at luncheon to-day by their unwise admiration of the ‘common soldier,’ as they call him. I did not choose to join in their chorus, but I confess I am puzzled, and I believe there *is* a mystery about the man. It is not because he *is*, as they say, undoubtedly handsome, but he *is* a gentleman, and a polished and educated gentleman, too,” and then she told how strangely familiar he

seemed to be with every nook and corner of that neighbourhood, and the names of the resident families, and how suddenly he changed the conversation when she remarked it to him.

“ Well,” replied Paget, “ it is quite possible, though not very probable, that the man may be a gentleman’s son—a wild fellow, who, having spent all he could lay his hands on, ruined mother and sister, and got into some bad scrape, enlisted. You must remember that it is only the good-for-nothing ‘gentleman,’ the thorough scapegrace, who ever enlists, and your ‘*preux chevalier*’ may be either a drunken spendthrift, if not even worse, enlisted under a false name, or else some self-educated prig, a superior “man of the people,” as they call themselves.”

“ Ah, do not say so. Remember this is the same man of whom Major Swift has such

a high opinion, and of whose deeds in India he tells such wonderful stories. I do wish that you had seen him, for I could have trusted your judgment, at least," she added archly, "I should if it confirmed my own; for I could not easily give up my opinion in this case—instinct tells me that I am right, that there *is* a mystery about the man's history, but that there can be no evil in such a fearless, honest face."

Before Paget could reply, just at the moment when they were at the very edge of the water, Hetty, in full chase, rushed past them—there was a scream—a splash—and there right before them the poor child was struggling in deep water; her clothes upheld her for a minute; the hands released their hold of her gathered treasures, then with a gurgling stifled cry for help the poor little thing sank, the water closed over her, and only the wild flowers and wreaths remained

on the surface, like emblems on a tomb, marking the spot where she had gone down.

Lady Standish screamed “Harry! Mr. Morley! help! help! quick!” but in an instant Paget had thrown off his coat, and dashed into the water. It was an awful moment of anxiety for the lookers on. Hearing the cries most of the party had collected on the bank. Paget was striking out and lifting his head to look in all directions. Hetty was nowhere to be seen, the wild flowers floated on deceiving him as to the spot to be tried; but Lady Standish with eyes starting, and white rigid face of agony, kept pointing decidedly in one direction, urging and encouraging him repeatedly. Paget dived, and disappeared. Oh! moments of horror, that seemed an age of despair! The eddy where he had gone down passed away, and the relentless waters became calm. The suspense was almost more than the senses of those on the shore

could bear,—when—joy!—joy! a shout of relief broke from them—a few yards beyond where their straining eyes were gazing, the waters parted again and Paget came up, holding Hetty by the clothes and endeavouring to keep her head well up. Mrs. Domville had gone off into hysterics, and was laughing wildly; but no one heeded her. The danger was not over yet. The half-drowned pair were farther than ever from land. The exertion to a man of Paget's life was severe; he was evidently distressed, and with the burden on his arm could scarcely make any way. The water just at that spot was deep, but he saw the bed of lilies that had been poor Hetty's snare, and rapidly judging that it would be shallower there, with a desperate effort he made for the bank near them. Lady Standish rapidly tore off her shawl, and others following her example, Morley and the other gentlemen

knotted them together, and just as Paget, very exhausted, came within reach, Harry dexterously threw one end on to his very hand; he caught it, and then gently and cautiously they were drawn to land.

It was a pitiful sight; the rosy cheeked, merry little Hetty in such a sorry plight, and Paget panting, and ghastly white. A few minutes more and it must have been too late; but thank God they were safe. Hetty was soon wrapped in all the dry shawls they could muster, and Harry and another of the gentlemen undertook to carry her to the lodge, which fortunately was not far off, and where there would be hot tea and the carriages waiting. Paget declared he could walk, but with his wet clothes hanging on him, and exhausted as he was, he made a slow march of it, poor fellow.

It was a sad little gathering round the tea-table, compared to what had been in-

tended; but all were now determined to be as cheerful as possible, to encourage and rally the sufferers, whose nerves were terribly shaken. Lady Standish whispered to Harry to ride on and order fires to be lighted and rooms ready for them. The lodge-keeper's wife bustled about, pouring gin, the only spirit forthcoming from her stores, into their tea, which was given them by many eager hands, and then Lady Standish, easily persuading Mrs. Domville to confide her child to her by saying, "You know the damp from their clothes would be sure to give you neuralgia," took both the dripping sufferers with her in the close carriage that had brought the elder ladies, gave the order to "drive fast," and off they went. Then with both windows up, contentedly bearing the stifling heat in her joy and thankfulness at having both her friends alive and in her care, with tears now running down her

cheeks, the true woman ministered to her two friends, continually heaping up wraps on Paget, who, huddled in one corner of the carriage, shivered ominously, and from time to time laying her healing hand on his to still its aguish trembling, while she sat opposite, holding Hetty close to her to keep her warm, and the only sound that broke the silence between the three was a low gentle murmur of love and encouragement that came from the usually stately Lady Standish, like the cooing of a parent dove.

When they reached Standish, Sir Thomas and Harry were standing on the steps, with a crowd of servants behind them. Hetty was quickly lifted out and carried up the long staircase. Lady Standish, turning to her husband, said, “Thank God it is no worse; I will attend to Hetty while you and Harry look after James. Put him in a hot bath at once, and then between the blankets

in a warm bed, and I will send him something to take.” A ghastly smile and a poor attempt at a joke, which for once was a wretched failure, was the only response from her patient, as he was hurried off by his friends.

It was not very long before Harry came for the “dose” for “that fine fellow Paget,” reporting that he was comfortable in bed, and seemed better.

“Do you know, Lady Standish, I never liked a clever man before; but Paget is a regular trump.”

The “dose” was a glass of very hot brandy and water (and a biscuit), with something in it to induce sleep and prevent fever; the orders, perfect stillness and repose.

“And so, Harry, you had better leave him, and say from me that he is on no account to get up, but to ring when he wants anything.”

Hetty’s treatment was very similar. The

house was ordered to be kept very quiet ; no gong was sounded for dinner, which was on this occasion a very subdued meal. In the course of the evening Lady Standish and Harry met frequently as they went to listen at the doors of the invalids. Hetty slept soundly for several hours ; but Paget was restless and feverish, and, when he dosed at all, woke up wildly, with a start and a cry that gave cause for some anxiety, and when at about half-past eleven the anxious friend and hostess made her last rounds, Harry said his friend seemed so restless and queer that he meant to sleep on the sofa in his room. The boy's heart had been touched, and his senses quickened by the prompt unselfish courage that had saved his sister, in one whom hitherto he had not appreciated. So Lady Standish smiled approvingly on him, and having given instructions for the treatment of his patient, and enquired

if he had lights, and all that might be required, with a whispered “God bless you, dear Harry; remember sound sleep is the cure, but be sure to come and knock at my door if you want anything in the night,” she turned away from the door of one patient to visit the other. At the end of another long passage she noiselessly opened the door of a room which was then nearly dark, for the fire was almost out, and saw that Hetty was sitting up in bed awake, leaning her head on her hand; she was thinking—Hetty thinking! When she heard the slight sound, and saw who it was, she said, “Oh, please come in, I am awake and quite well. I am so sorry, dear Lady Standish—so sorry and unhappy. Will you forgive me for giving you all so much trouble and spoiling all your pleasure, to say nothing of your pretty dress and everything. Oh, I do hate myself so for all I have done lately.”

Whereupon this lady so addressed, going close up to the bed, put her arm round the white limp-robed girl, who began to sob at this touch of kindness, and said: “Hush, Hetty dear, hush, you must not talk so; you have been rather wild, child, but that is all over; you have had a lesson, and mean to be quite a staid, grown-up young lady in future, I know. There, do not cry so, dear, or you *will* make me sad, and give me trouble, for I shall think you are ill; there is nothing to cry for now. Tell me, do you feel quite well?”

“Oh yes,” said Hetty, cheering up, “quite well! I could have gone down, only you told me not; but, dear Lady Standish, I want to ask you something: How is Mr. Paget? I shall never dare to look him in the face again. I have always been so rude to him—and to think that *he* should be so noble as to jump into the water, and nearly get drowned himself to save me!”

It was a pretty picture in the dim light: the simple, maidenly-looking room, the little chintz bed, the young girl in her white night-dress, with her little round black head nestled on the shoulder of her friend. The fire just then flickered up and showed them both quite plainly. Lady Standish's grand figure. She had taken off her evening dress when she dismissed her maid, and wrapped round her a light blue silk quilted dressing gown. She had not waited to unfasten her jewels—diamonds gleamed here and there, and a massive band of gold encircled her grand and shapely arm. Her hair was pushed carelessly back from the temples. In the free and unrestrained attitude of that hour she might have stood for a Semiramis or a Cleopatra.

As the flame blazed up it showed Hetty conscious and blushing, as she made her little speech about Paget, and it showed a

startled expression mixed with a grave intelligence and pity on the face of the elder lady.

Ah ! had the time come when this child, too, would enter into the great battle of life ! Was there escape for none ? The flame died out as she said, “ Child, do you suppose that any true man would wait to think how a woman had behaved to him when her life was in danger—there, there, go to sleep,” and with another kiss she tucked her up and returned to her own room.

In this woman, motherly instinct, unfulfilled, was so strong, that its tendrils, missing their natural support, embraced and clung round all living things that needed love and help. It was a dangerous nature and position for a woman; but, as I said when first describing her character, there was strong sense and principle to help it, and if in fighting through the temptations and struggles of life, she had received a wound, it bled inwardly. The

world never guessed that this seemingly prosperous woman might suffer, or that her heart *might* be unsatisfied; and perhaps the world was right, for she made no sign.

It was not surprising, after the exciting event of the day, that Lady Standish should not sleep at once; for two or three hours she lay awake, thinking anxiously—mind and heart were full.

Sir Thomas was sleeping soundly. She carefully and noiselessly got up, and, gliding out into the passage, listened once more at the doors of her patients. A regular and heavy breathing came from the little chintz bed. She passed on to the other door and listened long—perfect stillness—then all was well; she once more betook herself to her bed, and as the angel of night spread his wings over her, he must have noticed the gentle loving expression that overspread the sleeping lady's face.



CHAPTER X.

RASHLY IMPORTUNATE.

The heart that is soonest awake to the flowers,
Is always the first to be touched by the thorns.

MOORE.

THE next morning Hetty came down to breakfast as well and blooming as usual. Paget did not appear till luncheon time, when he reported himself as all "right," though certainly he could not have been complimented on the vigour of his appearance. Hetty was decidedly shy and subdued in his presence; but he did not seem to perceive it, and after hoping that she was none the worse for her "ducking," the subject was dropped by common consent.

This was the eve of the much talked of *fête*, and it was agreed that it should be spent very quietly, and that nothing should be done beyond a drive to Datchet to see the new schools, and home by Windsor, where Lady Standish had some shopping to do, and last orders to give, for the morrow. Everyone agreed to go excepting Isabel, who preferred staying at home; but when the carriages were at the door Morley was nowhere to be found, and so the rest of the party had to start without him.

Isabel was writing letters in her room, but after hearing the carriages drive away, she took her parasol and a book and sallied forth to enjoy a little solitude in her favourite walk—that broad gravel path, that formed one of the features of the garden at Standish, running between the old yew hedge on one side, and on the other a border of flowers with a background of evergreens; a summer-house

was at one end, and there were seats here and there at intervals. It had a still, peaceful aspect, and was altogether a tempting retreat for the idler or the student.

Isabel had not been long in the enjoyment of this favourite haunt,—after sitting for a short time she had risen and taken one turn to the entrance of the walk, and had almost reached the summer-house at the other end, when she was overtaken and joined by Morley. She was rather startled, for she had supposed him to have gone with the rest, and the discovery annoyed her, as she had congratulated herself on a quiet time alone, as she supposed. Also at the first glance she detected that there was something unusual with him,—a suppressed excitement. He was pale, and his customary self-possession seemed to have failed him, and with that wonderfully quick instinct that a woman has with regard to men, Isabel was at once on

the defensive. With an indifferent and somewhat haughty stare she replied to his greeting that he "thought he should find her there," "I don't know *why* you should expect to find me here, Mr. Morley; *I* thought that *you* had accompanied the rest of the party to Datchet."

"Then you *did* think of me, Miss Vernon? I stayed behind because you did. If you had gone, I should have gone too; but I am glad you did not; I never get a chance of being alone with you, I was determined at last to see you, and speak to you. Isabel, I love you!" seizing her hand. The offended girl, releasing her hand from his grasp, as quickly as she could, drew herself up to her full height, and in the coldest tones here broke in with: "Stop, Mr. Morley, I am sorry to hurt your feelings, but I cannot listen to such words, pray forget that you have spoken them, as I shall;"—but, with a rising tone as

he again got possession of her hand and held it firmly—"what right have you to address me in this way against my will?"

"What right?" he hissed out between his teeth; as much right as that coxcomb who has been my rival. You would have loved me if it had not been for Gerald Erne—*Curse him!*" They were both too agitated to hear a little piteous cry close to them, and he went on:—"Ha, ha! you think that he loves you! I tell you he is trifling and amusing himself with you. Here, *here*, where you are, he has assignations with other women. I have seen a meeting with my own eyes."

"Stop; how *dare* you speak to me in this way? Leave me this moment, sir," striving to release her hand, but in vain. "Captain Erne is a gentleman of honour, who would scorn to slander a man behind his back!"

"He is a spendthrift, over head and ears

in debt—Curse him, a hundred curses on him ! ”

A figure had stepped forward through one of the openings of the yew hedge, and stood there like a ghost—a girl in black, her face ashy pale, her hands clenched tight, her eyes flashing with anger, her lips moved as if she were speaking, but no sound came. Neither Isabel nor Morley looked towards her, and he went on excitedly :—“ Dare to speak to you ? I love you, Isabel, and, by God, you shall listen to me ! I dare anything now.” And he caught her in his arms and kissed her again and again.

The poor girl struggled in his brutal grasp and screamed for help, and in a moment, as if by magic, at her call there came crashing through the shrubs and over the flower-border, a powerful man in undress uniform ; and it was but the work of a moment for Duncan Meredith to snatch

Isabel from her persecutor, and to send him spinning for yards, stumbling, and staggering, till he fell in a heap against the yew hedge, close to where Sibyl was standing; but he did not see her even then, and, with a look of withering contempt, the girl vanished through the hedge in the same ghostly way that she had appeared, as it would seem to those who did not know of the slanting openings into the garden behind.

Poor Isabel clung in terror to the arm of her rescuer, crimson with shame and indignation, trembling from head to foot; she still kept appealing to him for help, and it was some moments before his words could reach her senses and soothe her alarm.

“ Do not be frightened, Miss Vernon; you are quite safe. I will not leave you till you are safe; that cowardly ruffian

will not dare to annoy you any more.” Then, seeing the colour die out of her face, which became very white, and feeling her become heavier on his arm, he said very gently: “I think you had better go back to the house; I am going there too, and I will see you safe.”

There was a pause; then, with a conquest over self, the brave man added, “Captain Erne sent me over from Hounslow to fetch something he wanted. I had left my horse at the stable, and I was going towards the house when I heard you cry out; that is how I so fortunately came to be on the spot, Miss Vernon.”

This little speech, simple as it seems, brought Isabel to her senses quicker than anything else that had been said. For the first time she looked up, and remembered him; the mention of Erne’s name and Duncan’s honest declaration of himself made

her realize her position. With an effort over herself, she roused from the faintness creeping over her, and said, "Thank you—thank you very much for your assistance—yes—I will go into the house at once ; and," with a slight accession of dignity, "I can walk very well now, thank you. I am very grateful to you, Mr. Meredith."

She bowed to him and hurried away. He followed at a little distance, watched her reach the front door unmolested, and disappear. Then he turned away, went round to the back of the house, waited while the parcel was found for which he had been sent, and rode back to Hounslow.

Poor Duncan ! The sun had shone upon him for the brief space of a few minutes, his short day was over, and he was left in the cold twilight of duty and routine.

When Lady Standish and her friends returned from their drive the servant announced

that Mr. Morley was gone, but had left a note for her ladyship. Lady Standish glanced over it, and then read aloud that “he had been obliged to go up to town suddenly on business which he thought might detain him, and prevent his being present at her *fête* the next day, and, indeed, not allow him to return at all to Standish at present, which he much regretted. He had known of this necessity in the morning, but had said nothing about it, preferring this way of parting, which had spared him the pain of taking leave of so many kind friends. His best thanks to her and to Sir Thomas for their hospitality, and for the very agreeable visit he had spent, etc. etc.”

When this letter was read everyone looked at the other in surprise; but there were not many regrets, unless it may have been from Miss Standish, who fancied she had found an “intelligent” disciple in Mr. Morley.

Hetty the faithless, began some impertinence about “somebody’s room, etc.—” Paget put on a quizzical expression, especially when it was discovered that Miss Vernon “had retired to her room with a bad headache.”



CHAPTER XI.

DR. MARTIN'S SCIENCE AT FAULT.

The primal duties shine aloft, like stars ;
The charities, that soothe, and heal, and bless,
Are scattered at the feet of man like flowers.

WORDSWORTH.

IT is now time to return to those friends whom we seem to have left too long, and to give the reader an account of how it fared with the family in Thames Terrace, whom we left in sorrow and mourning, and how it was that Sibyl Blake mysteriously appeared at such a critical moment in the long walk at Standish Park.

Death is a mighty healer and sanctifier. When Oliver Blake realized that the long-

suffering wife, whom he had torn from her connections and the congenial life so necessary to her, to remain for years in obscurity, neglected and unconsidered, even by himself, was actually dead, lost to him for ever, gone from him without a word of love, a remorse and revulsion of feeling took place within him as strong as the man's narrow nature rendered possible. A vision rose before him of his young wife as he first saw her in her pride and beauty: his mind went back to the early days of his married life—to the time when he might yet have won her love, and all might have been so different, but for the demon of revenge and greed that took possession of his soul and stifled the better feelings of his nature. Too late now to atone to the dead. He confessed to his own heart the sin and misery of his past life; but what availed that to *her*? The undying despair of that “too late” rang in his ears,

as he sat buried in aching thought in the darkened chamber of mourning.

In the dusk of the evening a timid knock came at the door, and receiving no answer, Sibyl entered worn and weary, carrying a plate of food and a glass of wine, which she put down by him on the table, saying, "Papa, you have taken nothing all day, old Anne says, and she made me bring you this; do try and eat it."

Oliver had always loved Sibyl. Who could help doing so? He was really fond of music, and had encouraged her talent by every means in his power; he liked to hear the sweet sounds through the house even in his business hours, and almost the only happy time that the husband and wife enjoyed together might be said to be, when they listened together to their child's music. Yes, in his own strange uncouth fashion he loved his daughter more than any one suspected.

His usually morose and gloomy temper was less morose, and in some degree less gloomy to her ; but she had always been afraid of him, and her just and loving nature could not overlook his treatment of her mother. So even now, with her heart bleeding and yearning for sympathy, she came timidly towards him.

Wrapped in the selfish habit of years, he had remained all day absorbed in his own trouble, and had forgotten her, but when he heard the sad quavering of her voice, and saw the poor tear-stained tired face, his heart was touched, and a new thought entered his mind. It was *not* yet too late for everything. He could yet atone to the child for the sin to the mother, and without noticing the untasted food, he said abruptly, “ Child, I have sinned, and my sins have found me out.” There was a pause. What child can resist the humbling of a parent before her, however low that parent may have fallen ? And when

Oliver stretched out his arms towards her, saying, “Can you love me, Sibyl?” the girl fell into them sobbing and murmuring, “Oh, papa, papa, she was so good, she could have loved you so much better.” There she lay sobbing as if her heart would break; but her head was on a father’s shoulder, and her arms round his neck, and no heart breaks with such comfort left as that.

About an hour later, when the door opened again and old Anne Carr came in with candles and a cup of tea for her darling, she found her sitting close by her father, holding his hand and feeding him as if he had been a child; and though the old woman had that day closed the eyes of her mistress, whom she had followed from her girlish home and remained with, first as maid, and then as nurse, and then maid again, through all her sorrows, she felt happier than she had done for many a year.

As for Sibyl, she had found a father—he loved her—he needed her, and deep and sacred as her grief was for her beloved mother, a womanly nature like hers could not be utterly desolate while there was one being left to whom she could minister.

The next day found her utterly prostrated in strength, and Dr. Martin, coming early to look after his “lamb,” gave strict orders to old Anne that her young mistress was to remain in bed, at all events till the evening; but as soon as he was gone Sibyl said, “You must mind and take great care of papa then, Anne, and tell him, that if he does not come to see me, I shall get up directly.” And so, much as the old nurse’s eyes wondered at the sight, Oliver Blake sat by the bed-side of his daughter.

By slow degrees the dreary, dreadful week passed away. Passed away, as *all* things pass, good or bad. Slowly, it may

seem, to our impatient sense, but surely, swiftly, as we shall know, at our first tread upon the other shore. No step ever to be retraced—the fondest hour never to be lived again. The things that *seem* most real, fleeting soonest. How vain our struggles to catch the shadows as they pass. Our separate lives at best are but as flickering specks, that flood the heavens on a starry night. Your fancy singles one, yet, even while you gaze, it melts in blue ether, and its place is lost. Yes, all things pass—and we must pass away; only one earth-born sense shall live for ever. Love is deathless ! Warm human love, that often errs and leads us on to direst, as to noblest deeds, is still a heavenly seed, in mercy given to widen and to grow into a higher love (just as the flowers are sent to use our sight for heaven); for those whose hearts can even love the lowest, shall they not surely love the highest

when they know it? Speak gently then of love—and pityingly of those who love not wisely here. It may be that the yearning, wandering heart, seeking through years for that which satisfies it not, may find at last its natural home with Christ—a bruised germ from earth, blooming in love divine.

* * * * *

Oliver Blake shrank from the pain of looking through any writings that his wife had left behind her. It was Sibyl who examined her mother's private papers. There were not many: a diary, a few packets of letters, one carefully tied round with ribbon and labelled "records of my boy," containing a small lock of fair hair "cut from baby's head," a tiny kid shoe, Eton letters, all numbered and dated, a very few letters with the Indian post-mark, a lock of darker hair sent to his mother before embarking for India, with a very imperfect Daguerreotype

likeness. Another packet was addressed "for Sibyl," in which, after pages of love and advice and encouragement, the mother gave a history of her life—her girlhood, the love of Robert Erne, then Viscount Clare, but now the Earl Mount Ida, her disappointment, her hasty marriage, the breaking down of her hopes and resolutions to be contented. The daughter's tears flowed fast as each line laid more bare her mother's aching, broken-hearted life.

"Poor mamma, oh poor mamma," she sobbed, "and poor papa too, for oh! she never loved you; oh, if only she had loved you;" but her tears dried and her cheeks burned as she read in the later entries of her mother's journal mention of Gerald Erne as the son of her old love, and the fond hope that union would at last be brought about between them in the persons of their children. Colouring violently Sibyl closed the

tell-tale pages, and separating these two packets from everything else, to be kept always by her as the sacred relics of her beloved mother and brother, she proceeded with her painful business till the task was complete.

Among Oliver Blake's new-born resolutions was the determination to break off all partnership with Morley, as a first proof forced on himself of amendment. He had had an interview with him in the office, which, even with death so close to them, had been a stormy one, for his accomplice was not to be easily shaken off; he sneered at this tardy morality, complained of being cheated and deceived, and they parted in anger. Nevertheless Oliver at present remained fixed in his purpose to retire from the lucrative money-lending part of his business. Whether his good resolutions would be lasting had yet to be proved; but he took the most likely course to make them

so. He determined on making a complete change of habits; he had mercantile relations with Turkey; they were somewhat endangered by the war; his presence there for a time would greatly tend to secure and advance them. He would shut up this city house, where he had spent such long grinding years; it would be a saving of expense (the ruling spirit was not to be laid all at once), and in those curiously-contrived cellars the hoarded riches of his life would be safe; he had no fear; how few knew anything of their existence, and what pains had he spared on their spring-bolted locks. There lay hidden valuable securities, mortgages, pure gold in unworked bars and dust, money itself even lying dead, that he might revel in the sight of it, curiously wrought golden cups and jewels, paintings, collections of gems of rare value, all waiting and accumulating for the day so long deferred

that was to see him burst suddenly into the ranks of those who had slighted him ; and now it seemed that he had waited too long ; the one who was to have triumphed with him had passed away, and the desire was buried with her. The habit of life was strong upon him ; he could not alone face the gay throng and compete in the fashionable show, and the resolve was wise that decided on breaking away from the old life for a time to meditate at leisure on a future. So everything was planned for a journey to Turkey. Sibyl should go too. The change would be good for her, and the father would not have liked to part for long with her society, which now seemed a necessity to him, but he decided on starting first, as soon as his affairs could be arranged, and Sibyl and old Anne Carr were to follow a month later, by which time he would be settled and prepared to receive them at Constantinople.

Old Dr. Martin was very urgent that Sibyl should pay him and his wife a visit. They were going down to Windsor for a few weeks. The change of scene and country life would be the very best thing to revive her strength and spirits. The old couple so kindly offered to see after everything that would be necessary for her start, and to see her on board up to the last moment, that Mr. Blake was only too glad to leave his child in such good hands. And thus it came to pass that the old house in Thames Terrace was shut up; that we read of Sibyl's driving with Dr. and Mrs. Martin by Virginia Water on the day that they passed Gerald Erne, and of her appearance a few days later by the yew hedge at Standish, and being a witness of the painful scene between Miss Vernon and Mr. Morley.

Mrs. Martin had heard much of the gardens of Standish, and her husband had ob-

tained leave to see them, through the interest of Sir Thomas Standish's family doctor at Windsor. It was by the merest chance that they had made use of their permission on the very afternoon that we have described, and that while the interested old couple were listening reverently to the head gardener's disquisition on the two new geraniums that had come out, and were asking advice about growing them in the window of a dingy, smoky house in the heart of the city, Sibyl wandered off by herself, revelling in the soft perfumed air, and the brilliant colours massed together in such exquisite taste around her, and while amused with the curious plan of the old hedge and enjoying the pretty floral sight from one of its openings, she was suddenly arrested by the sound of voices, and one of them, Morley's, so close to her. She did not mean to listen, but stopped suddenly, not

liking to intrude further into the paradise that tempted her. While she hesitated, came Gerald Erne's name, the wicked accusation against him, and that cruel curse; oh God! what did it all mean? Gerald Erne? Gerald Erne was *hers*. It is true that she had already felt surprised and disappointed that he had taken no notice of her since her mother's death, beyond the card on which he had scribbled the offer of help, but she had not needed the *kind* of help he proffered. Even had she done so, how could she have applied to him? She knew the name of his regiment well enough, but she was unconscious of his changed quarters. She unreasonably forgot, or else was unaware that the house in Thames Terrace was left wholly to the charge of an old woman, a stranger, and that no message or visitors' cards would be likely to follow her to her friend's abode, so that she knew

nothing of Gerald's last attempt to see her, and she had suffered secretly from his silence and sorely missed his dear society, but she taught herself to believe it could be easily explained, no doubt; perhaps he had been busy or absent, perhaps he delicately would not intrude upon her early grief; the time was not really as long as it felt to her, and in the purity and faith of her own heart she never doubted his love. Though he had never actually told her in words that she was dear to him, he had looked it, inferred it, in a thousand ways, and she felt it and knew it, and never doubted him. But now! how changed in a moment did life appear. She heeded not the base insinuations of the wretched Morley. She would not have believed them on his oath; in a moment his contemptible nature had become plain to her; *his* accusations were false as his friendship,—too low to think of in connection with

Gerald Erne; but—that beautiful girl! She, too, loved him, then! and oh, agony! had he sought her love? She had not denied it! These thoughts rushed like fire through her brain. She stood there before those who could have told her all, but they heeded her not, and she had no power to speak. She stood paralysed with the blow, and was only roused when Morley's prostrate form fell almost at her feet, and then, with a withering look of hatred and contempt, she turned away, and with slow uncertain steps rejoined her friends. She felt very faint and ill. Poor child, she thought, "if only she might die and go to her mother, who had never failed her!" The gardens had lost their beauty; the colours had faded from the flowers: their perfume had become a sickly vapour; the warmth had gone from the sun, for poor Sibyl; and as she walked silently and droopingly by the side of her chatty,

chirping old friends (who were too much absorbed in their own delight and in the attentions of the head gardener to notice her condition any more than they had done her straying from them), the grey and barren moor could not have seemed more black to her chilled senses.

When they reached the gate, and the good doctor was handing in the two ladies, his quick professional eye at once detected that something was wrong.

“ Why, Susan, we have been very inconsiderate; we have knocked up the ‘pet lamb.’ My dear, why did you not say that you were tired, and we would have gone home sooner? ”

She gave him a faint smile, but no answer; her tongue was parched and refused to speak. The old man, puzzled and anxious, drove quickly back to the inn, where he laid his charge down on the horsehair sofa

in a sitting-room, half dining-room, and half drawing-room, covered her up with a shawl—for on this summer day she shivered every now and then—felt her pulse, and told her she was to sleep. So Sibyl lay with closed eyes for hours; but sleep is a prescription that cannot always be administered, and as from the further end of the room the doctor looked from time to time in the direction of the sofa he was pained by the sad quivering of the expressive mouth, and the general broken-hearted look in the young face. As evening drew on, and seemed to have brought no change to his pet, he moved his chair close beside her, and holding one little hand within his own great fist, he tried all that cheering, caressing words would do; he was sorely puzzled, and began to fear that the shock of her mother's death had left some hidden mischief which he had not fathomed. She had been delicate, variable in spirits, as

was natural to the newness of her grief; but she had rallied and responded to their kindness, and to the sweet air and sounds of country life, as a hare-bell opens to the sun. Since the first week of bereavement she had never been overwhelmed in this way, and the change was so sudden that it was mysterious. What memory or allusion could have caused it? She had not been out of his sight (so the good doctor imagined)! The only result of his well-meant attempt at consolation was, that large crystal tears flowed from under the closed eyelids, clung for a moment to the heavy fringe of lashes, and then rolled slowly and unheeded down her cheeks. Baffled in this course, he presently tried another. Without changing his position, or releasing the hand he held, he took up the evening paper just brought in and began to read aloud scraps of news to his wife: "The Movements of the Court." "The State of

the Thermometer at different places.” “The violence of a Thunderstorm in the North.” “Sudden Death from Sun-stroke.” “News from the Seat of War.” “Army and Navy Intelligence.” “Her Majesty’s Royal 27th Hussars under orders for immediate embarkation to the Crimea.” Ha!—with what a sudden twitch the little hand was withdrawn—the large eyes opened wide, and Sibyl suddenly sat up.

“That’s right, my dear, you are feeling better now, I see. Susan, it is time for tea, and do order cutlets and some poached eggs, for I don’t know what you may be, but we are hungry, we two, are we not Sibyl?”

Ah! my dear Dr. Martin, I fear you are really an old man. Tea and cutlets, and even poached eggs, are not to be despised, but they will not do much towards curing a love-sick girl in the first stage of the complaint.

To please her friend, Sibyl, docile and patient, tried hard to swallow a few mouthfuls, and then was given over to old Anne and put to bed.

“I can’t make it out, Susan,” said the doctor, as soon as the door was closed, “I can’t make it out. She has looked so much better, and been so much more cheerful these last days. She has never been like this. She startled me rather that day that we drove to Virginia Water, but she was never like this. Do you remember she saw some one, or fancied it was some one, who had known her mother; but she has really been better ever since, and so ready and anxious always to walk or drive in the neighbourhood. How interested she seemed in the barracks the other day—enquired what regiments were stationed there, and was quite lively and interested in everything. I can’t make it out. The poor lamb must

have suffered a great shock to her nervous system—has a very delicate organization. We did wrong, Susan, to stay so long in those forcing houses; I found them deeply interesting; it is delightful to see what can be done by art and science now, and how education is brought within the reach of all classes. That Scotch gardener was a clever example, had a truly scientific mind, and a genuine love for his work. That was the finest plant I have ever seen,—but we were wrong, Susan,—that moist heat is too enervating for a young girl's constitution."

" Well, my dear, it may be so; but I really think you expect too much from that poor girl; her sorrow is new to her, and hers is a solitary position—no sisters nor brother, nor any relations—it seems to me; and her father only lately became a father to her; it is early days yet with her, Joseph. Don't you remember when I lost my poor dear mother

how nearly I faded away altogether? I became a mere thread paper, as you may say" (this was difficult to realise seeing what a buxom figure Mrs. Martin presented now). "If it hadn't been for you, Joseph, for your goodness, I mean, dear, and for that wonderful receipt of suet and milk that Julia Armstrong insisted on my taking, I don't believe I should have been here now—I don't indeed."

It sounds a curious and rich compound, but decidedly Mrs. Martin *did* look as if she had been fed plentifully with suet and milk.

The doctor threw his silk pocket-handkerchief over his bald head and settled himself in the arm-chair for his evening nap; but obliviousness did not answer at the usual summons; his kind heart was not at rest. It might be natural that Sibyl should not be quite strong yet, but there was a lurking suspicion that he was at fault, and that something was really wrong with her; what could

it be? Presently he sat forward, wide awake, but with the bandanna still over his head, and said :

“ Susan, I don’t like the idea of the poor lamb going out to a heathenish land after that father, and with no better protector than an old woman. I have no faith in him, Susan—no faith; the change is too sudden to last. I can’t bear to let her go, and so soon, too, before she is strong. I shall tell her to-morrow that she had better wait until she hears from him, at all events. It is so strange that he never came again to say, ‘good-bye,’ so strange that he never sent a line, if he was prevented coming. Susan,” the old man began again, more timidly, hesitating, and glancing secretly at his wife, “ I wish Oliver Blake would leave Sibyl altogether with us; we have no child, she would brighten our hearth, and be to us as a daughter.”

Mrs. Martin had a kind, warm heart, and she was fond of Sibyl, and tender to her in her trouble, but she had not received her at her birth, nor watched her infancy, and tended her in all her juvenile ailments, nor watched with pride her spring from childhood into beautiful womanhood, as the good doctor had. Moreover, she was gifted with a larger share of worldly wisdom than her husband, and the reply came rather sharply and crushingly :

“ Now really, Joseph, you surprise me by such a speech as that. Don’t you know that Solomon teaches us that fathers are to look after their own children, and children are to love and follow their own fathers, whether to Turkey or elsewhere ; and people are not to go choosing fathers and children for themselves just as they like. Besides, what should we do with a pretty young creature like that on our hands ? Why, do you know how very

beautiful she is, Joseph? I see the pleasure with which the people look at her as we go about—men and women too. Why, she would no sooner be settled down comfortably with us than she would be wanting to marry, or somebody insisting on marrying her, and no end of trouble and grief! I really am surprised at you, Joseph! though you mean it kindly, I know, my dear," said the buxom lady softening, now that she had had her say uninterruptedly.

"I will try again to-morrow to persuade her to try the suet and milk," she murmured to herself.

Kind, foolish old doctor! It had never entered his imagination that the "child" Sibyl would ever marry, or anyone want to marry her! Who could she marry? It was a new and appalling idea for his pet lamb, who was to have been for ever a child in his eyes. He saw the superior wisdom of his

partner, and feeling rather humbled, pursued the subject no farther, only remarking, “Well, well, Susan, I dare say you are right, but I shall talk to her to-morrow, and point out that rather than start without hearing from her father she had better forfeit her passage in the “Nancy Bell.”

Accordingly the next morning a strong appeal was made to Sibyl, but her resolution was fixed. Oliver Blake had paid them one visit at Windsor, and had then explained that he had made every arrangement for her joining him by the vessel “Nancy Bell.” He gave her full instructions as to the course that she was to pursue, the time and place of the ship’s sailing, the name of the captain to whom he had spoken, and who would be sure to be kind to her, the address to go to immediately on arriving at Constantinople, if he were not awaiting her on the landing place, a blank cheque to fill up at last for

whatever sum she might require. Nothing remained to be told, but he promised to run down again the last thing to bid them good-bye. The time for that had long passed, and his ship had some time sailed, and they had had no letter, nor heard aught of him.

Sibyl naturally felt some disappointment, but she concluded that business had occupied him to the last moment, and interfered with his intentions. She was not yet used to consideration from him. She had no evil to fear, and was not anxious. And, therefore, no arguments were of any avail in shaking her determination to carry out her father's instructions to the letter.



CHAPTER XII.

HER MAJESTY'S 27TH.

ON the 19th July, 1854, there was an unusual stir in Hounslow Barracks, at that time occupied by Her Majesty's distinguished regiment, the Royal 27th Hussars. Men and officers of all ranks were going in and out, looking pre-occupied and important with weighty consciousness. The men, with nothing on but their shirts and trousers, whistled more vigorously, and rubbed down more energetically than usual at morning stables. The cornets mostly had an eager, elated look, like young war horses sniffing the conflict from afar, while the more

experienced officers wore a not less determined but a calmer and more business-like expression. All were busy, or fancied themselves so. Many were the letters written to mothers and sisters, aye, and even to more tender correspondents, on that day.

The cause of all this unusual stir was this. The long expected orders had arrived from the Horseguards for the 27th Hussars to embark for the seat of war in the Crimea within the week. Already one day had elapsed since the order had been issued, before the regiment knew it, for the Colonel had been absent and the official letter followed him unheeded by the Major on duty, through some mistake of his servant, who sent it with his private letters. How many engagements of various natures had to be fulfilled in the short time that remained ! How many leave-takings to be gone through in the few days that began to be counted by hours ! How

many orders to be given ; what purchases to be made for comfort on the voyage and in camp ; what horses to be examined, and sold, and bargained for,—none can tell but those who, like the gallant 27th Hussars, have suddenly had to quit a life of luxury and gaiety, to confront a formidable enemy on foreign soil.

It is said that in all partings it is more sad for those who remain behind than for those who go away, but surely that is doubtful. Those who are left have at least the engagements, the duties, the routine of home that apportions to every hour its regular work, and leaves but little time for looking back.

Even if able to indulge in that greatest of all luxuries, contemplation, they have much to soothe the sad retrospect. “In that chair he sat while he gave, or received, the counsel of a friend. There is the walk where

many a time and oft we held sweet converse; such and such trifles are hallowed by his touch. In that spot we looked our last farewell, and parted——” But the one who goes away loses all, but memory, without a landmark on which to hang its melancholy.

It was no doubt well for the gallant, ill-fated 27th, brave as was every officer and man in its ranks, that it had no time to give to the sole contemplation of leaving all so dear to them at home, nor to dwell on the possible future that awaited them abroad. It is well for all who are going away that they have the practical bustle of preparation to deaden the sense of loss for the time, for, when all is finished, when the excitement of the start is over, the missing packages found, and everything stowed away in its proper place, when the last clasp of the last friend who followed to see the end has loosened its

clinging hold, when the anchor has weighed, and all that remains of the familiar past is a misty outline of England's cliffs, surely the boldest heart may learn the sense of desolation for a space, as it starts alone to fight with fortune.

The first few hours after the order came were spent in desultory talk and excitement at Hounslow, but then each man settled down to the consideration of his own private affairs—to write letters, give orders, consult engagements, and see what must be given up, what might be kept—so that by the time they all met at mess, much had been decided on, the past was already waning from their minds, and the future becoming a tangible reality. Leave-takings were as much as possible to be avoided. The families of some lived too far off, the short intervening time would be taken up in the journeys—of some, the friends had started on continental

trips, or were scattered, paying visits ; the few whose families were still in town, of course would see them and go through the painful pleasure of personal adieux.

On comparing notes, it was curious what a universal determination had been arrived at by those who had been invited to Lady Standish's *fête*, to fulfil their engagements at all costs, if possible. It was so near, they argued, that it would not take up much time, and they should meet there so many whom they knew. It was sure to be a pleasant gathering, and would leave cheerful remembrance of many friends.

They had sat down to mess, each one more pre-occupied than usual ; but a good dinner and good company had had its effect, and now as they lounged about in the smoking-room they were in full talk.

Against the chimney-piece leaned a man with a profusion of black hair, scented and

arranged like a hair-dresser's, a black moustache and whiskers, a smooth white receding forehead, and receding chin, his eyes half shut, and an inane smile pervading his whole countenance; one leg, with the foot and knee turned out, was stuck in advance of the other, his evening coat thrown wide open, and the thumb of one hand hooked into the arm-hole of his waistcoat, while the fingers of the other, every now and then removed a cigar from his mouth, as he looked down and surveyed his own proportions with bland and perfect satisfaction.

Phill Crofts was the butt and amusement of the regiment, but, wise in his own conceit, he did not know it. At the moment when we have drawn attention to him, he was holding forth, and the meandering stream of words was flowing on in his usual vague, slow, but continuous fashion, without comma, or point, or variation of tone.

"Oh yes you fellahs we'll go to Lady Standish's *fête*—Lady Standish's a fine woman and always has a lot of fine gals about her—'pon my soul I shouldn't like to miss that day—the old boy gives good ch'mpagne too. Lots of ch'mpagne and fine gals — that's my motto boys — I don't see because a fellah's going to be stowed up in a filthy steamer and p'raps be shot after, he shouldn't enjoy his ch'mpagne and look at the fine gals while he can—'pon my soul I don't—but its of no use having any new clothes now eh—I was just going to order a new wescot—ah a —this is not quite the right sort of wescot for a fellah—a—its a very good wescot—a —a—but—a—a fellah ought to have a fashionable wescot when he goes among—a —the fair sex eh—I say you fellahs—a—what d'you think of this wescot — d'you think it's the right sort of wescot—eh—I

say Erne you've been staying at Standish—a—Park—any fine gals—eh—doocid lot of fine gals Lady Standish knows—Miss Vernon there—'pon my soul she's a de—vlish pretty gal—steps out—a—like a thorough bred—beautiful skin, and—a—a—all that sort of thing you know—between you and me she's rather sweet upon a—a fellah not far from this—a—smoking room.”

Erne glanced up quickly and angrily, but after looking in Phill's face, he only laughed gently to himself.

“ *I* know,” said Major Swift, with a comical wink at Erne. “ She asked so kindly after you the other day, Crofts;” then, in an undertone, which was audible to all around them, “ *Why* you don't propose to Miss Vernon I *can't* conceive. You know you believe her to be head over ears in love with you, now don't you old fellow ?”

Here, two or three young officers, seeing

the fun that might be had, gathered round, and with mock gravity began, "Now, look here Phill, I speak as a friend, don't you leave the country without booking Miss Vernon, if you think she'll have you; and a fine handsome fellow like you, why, who could resist you? not she, depend upon it—to say nothing of being clever, though, to tell you the truth, I don't believe Miss Vernon cares so much for your sort of talent as for your appearance; mind you make her feel what a lucky woman she is to get you, Phill, take my advice about that," and then these sincere friends, who themselves would almost as soon have dared to propose to a royal princess as to Isabel, with difficulty refrained from a roar of laughter.

"Upon my soul its doocid flattering to a fellah," said the misguided Crofts; "By Jove I've a great mind—a—to take your—a—

advice, if I felt quite sure—a—but I b’lieve you are right you fellahs—a—(looking down once more with a self-conscious, satisfied smile, and taking a longer survey than usual at his legs)—“a good-looking fellah—a—a devilish fine gal—a—I hope you fellahs are not making game of a fellah—I’m going to Lady Standish’s *fête*—a—by Jove I’ll do it—it won’t do to tell the guv’nor beforehand—I’ll say after—‘I say guv’nor I’m a lucky fellah—a—and you’re a lucky fellah—a—to have a fellah for a son—’pon my soul you’re a devilish lucky fellah guv’nor,’ says I—‘Phil,’ says he, ‘had you got that suit on when she accepted you?’ ‘Yes, guv’nor’ says I, all right, aint they?—a—except the wescot—‘what’s the matter with the wescot,’ says he, ‘very good wescot’—the guv’nor always says every wescot’s a good wescot—a—but I say old fellahs—a—I shall have to drink lots of ch’mpagne to screw myself up

to the mark, eh—a—” And so with ba-a-ing sound, becoming fainter in the distance, with his eyes half shut, almost blushing, and with an expression suffusing his face, half sheepish, and half jovial, but perfectly complacent, he sauntered out.

The door was scarcely closed before there was a burst of laughter from the whole room. The young ones held their sides and roared, “He’ll do it, he’ll do it, he’s ass enough for anything; by Jove, we *must* hear it; what a set down the donkey will get! his beautiful hair will be out of curl before he smells the briny.”

All joined in the laugh, it was impossible to help it.

“By the way,” said Major Swift, “have you young fellows ever heard of a trick we played upon Phill when we were quartered at Dublin? He came sauntering into the mess-room one day, saying in his usual slip-

shod way, 'I say you fellahs—saw a devilish fine gal yesterday in Phœnix Park—Miss—heiress—lots of money—looked sweet at me —'pon my soul—think I shall make up to her,' and then sloped out again. The same afternoon we concocted a note that required no answer, purporting to come from the lady's mother, inviting Phill to dine in a friendly way with them the next day. One or two of us knew that we were going to meet this family out at dinner that very day, so we fixed an early hour in the note that we might see the fun before we started, and there sure enough at about six o'clock out came Phill, in full regimentals, glowing with pomade and redolent with scent, called a car, and went off. Half an hour later he came back in a towering rage, threw our note upon the table, exclaiming, 'fernal shame—you fellahs—sell a fellah like that—servant laughed,—a—said ladies

just going out to dinner—some mistake—'pon my soul—too bad—make a fellah look quite widiculous—and such a devilish fine gal—lots of money—just the thing for the guv'nor,' and he bounced out again,"

"Bravo—what fun," exclaimed the Cor-net.

"Yes, but wait," said the little Major, "you have not heard the best part of the story. Of course when we met the young lady half an hour later we were still full of our joke, so we confessed to her the trick we had played. She, woman-like, took the part of the persecuted, and though she laughed till I thought she would have to leave the dinner-table, she pretended to be indignant on Phill's account, and declared that her mother *should* ask him to dinner as soon as possible. So a couple of days later in came Phill again, looking wonderfully wise, and threw a *real* note of invitation on

the table, saying, " Ah you fellahs—I'm not to be done so a second time—and make a fine gal think me quite widiculous—too sharp for you this time," and he stoutly refused to answer it even. In vain we tried to persuade him that it was genuine this time; we showed him the seal, the stamp on the paper; no, he was obstinate, declaring he was too sharp for us, and never would take the slightest notice of the invitation. To this day I believe he chuckles over the notion that he outwitted us all that time."

In such talk the evening wore away. The next day was devoted to preparations of various kinds. Most of the officers had leave given them for a few hours together for their private affairs; and also some of the men, amongst whom was Duncan Meredith. It was known that he went to town, but how he spent those few hours it is not necessary now to enquire. He returned before the time

granted had expired, offering to do the work of others who might require leave. Judging from the expression of his face, which was more gravely sad and determined than usual, his occupation had not been a happy one.

The day after that was the one fixed for Lady Standish's *fête*, to which all those who could get away were to go, and to return together in a drag, and they settled among themselves that, excepting to Lady Standish, no word should be said, until towards the end of the evening, of the regiment being under immediate orders. But Erne, as being more intimate at the house than any of the rest, was deputed to write beforehand to the hostess, and beg for her consent to a plan on which they had set their hearts, which was, that as they could not stay very late, they might all sit together with her, and those whom she would know to be their particular friends, at one of her many supper tables, so

that they might for the last time see friendly faces around them, and carry away the pleasant remembrance of kind words, and a last “God speed you,” given by a farewell clasp of fair hands, and looked from bright eyes to cheer them on their way.





CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL.

There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's capital had gathered then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men ;
A thousand hearts beat happily ; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes look'd love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage-bell.

CHILDE HAROLD.

THE morning dawned gloriously ; a thunderstorm had taken place in the night, but instead of breaking up the fine weather, as is so often the case, it had only refreshed the air, and all the green things that were thirsting from the long drought. By the afternoon no trace of damp was left even on the longest herbage, and the heat

was almost as great, though less overpowering than before. It was a perfect atmosphere for an evening out of door *fête*; such as could scarcely have been looked for, and but very rarely occurs in England. No *contre-temps* happened, therefore, to mar the success of Lady Standish's plan for the amusement of her guests. This was to be a *fête* apart from all ordinary occasions of the kind, a white day in the calendar of even the most *blasé habitués*. None of the usual arrangements of the house had been disturbed, and all the afternoon carriages and railway flys were arriving at the door, bringing those guests from a distance who were all to dress and many to sleep under the baronet's hospitable roof.

From an early hour in the morning many men had been at work, as indeed they had been the day before, and even through the night. The tents were erected as near to the house as could be managed. They

were on a magnificent scale, consisting of three very large rooms, besides cloak rooms, refreshment tents, etc. The withdrawing-room for chaperones, formed a wing to the ball-room, half of one side of which was open to it, and the supper tent was at the end of the ball-room, divided from it only by draperies and curtains. Lady Standish's ideas of decoration had been strictly carried out; there were the rich carpets and draperies, and warm colours in her eastern withdrawing-room, forming a pleasing contrast with the airy lightness of the dancing-tent, with its turfed centres and fountains. There were the water lilies, too, and a profusion of plants tastefully arranged wherever they produced the best effect, and hanging in ornamental baskets from the roof, alternately with chandeliers. The supper tent was in a totally different style from either of the others, as beffitted the object for which it was in-

tended. Here numerous tables of various capabilities were decorated with plate and trophies, and laden with every delicacy. At midnight a great gong was to sound, which was to be the signal for the numerous curtains dividing this tent from the ball-room to be simultaneously raised, and for the band to play, while the guests, without any form of etiquette, took their places wherever it pleased them to have their supper.

The dryness of the season enabled the garden immediately round the tents to be swept as clean as any floor ; the paths and approaches to the tents were illuminated with thousands of coloured lamps, and seats were placed here and there for the convenience of those who might wander out to enjoy the fresh air, or a moonlight talk.

It must, indeed, have seemed a perfect fairy land, or a scene from the Arabian Nights—the moon-lit paths ; the coloured lamps hang-

ing like rich fruits upon the trees ; the air laden with the heavy evening perfume of the flowers ; and then the blaze of light and colour within the tents ; graceful women moving to the sound of music ; the flash of jewels and of beauty, and the cool splash of the fountains.

Between eleven and twelve the evening was at its height. The gracious hostess had received all her guests at the entrance of the tents. She had seen the dancers suited with partners again and again, till none were left who stood in need of her friendly offices. She had devoted herself to the matrons and fathers of the assembly, till they were all chatting pleasantly in the eastern tent, as she moved a queen among them, dressed in the richest white satin, indescribably entwined about with lace, and wreathing Passion flowers, and diamonds ; her beautiful white arms and shoulders sparkling with jewels, but partially veiled with long black

lace, which, fastened by diamonds and a crimson Passion flower in her hair, fell from the top of her head more than half way down her back, or wrapped her round at pleasure like a Spanish mantilla.

Having done all she could, and with perfect success, to set everyone at their ease, so that they might seek enjoyment in their own way, she felt free to study her own pleasure, when she heard Gerald Erne saying:

“Now, Lady Standish, at last I claim my share of your attention. I have been a pattern of patience; do come with me for a little fresh air;” and wrapping the profusion of black lace well around her, he led her out in the moonlight.

The officers from Hounslow had unavoidably arrived late, but they were, in a way, the heroes of the evening, for it had become pretty generally known that they were to embark within a few hours for the seat of war.

The papers were teeming with news and anxious anticipations, and they were looked upon with the interest that was natural for men who would soon be in the thick of the fight. To dance with them, young ladies played sad tricks with their engagement cards that had been filled up too early in the evening, and those who were thus robbed of their rights good-naturedly behaved like men of peace, only claiming that they were to be rewarded by a double share of favours at a future opportunity.

Gerald Erne led his friend out into the garden, and after the first few words of congratulation on the success and beauty of her arrangements, there was a silence of some minutes between them ; at last he broke it by saying :

“ Dear Lady Standish, I wanted the pleasure of one more talk with you. I wanted to thank you for all your kindness, and—

your good intentions towards me. I fear you will think me ungrateful, but promise you will not be angry with me?"

"No, certainly not angry; but, have you nothing to tell me?"

"Yes; if your patience will be troubled with my troubles, for I *have* troubles. I deserve great praise from you to-night," he said, trying to speak lightly and cheerfully; "I have danced more than I have done for years, and behaved like a schoolboy; but it was only from a sense of my duty to you, that there might not be a speck in your heavens, for my heart felt heavy as lead all the time."

"What! Has Isabel refused you?"

"No, there it is. I was afraid you would think that I ought to have asked her; but I shall never ask Isabel Vernon to be my wife, and she would probably refuse me if I did. We understand one another now. We have danced together to night, we are very good

friends, but that is all. I am sure she knows that I do not love her as a man should love the woman he would marry. I have long admired her, I thought her the nicest girl I knew, and I thought I cared for her; but I find that it is not love, that there is another woman whom I love—shall always love, whether I ever see her again or not; I had lost her for a time, but I have seen her again here lately, and I know now that I love her, and shall love her to the end.”

“ Seen her here ! but who can she be—not—I hope—surely—I trust it is no unworthy infatuation ? ”

Lady Standish felt it to be a blow. She was interested in this man ; she was interested in Isabel ; she had made up her mind that the two interests would become one, and that this night would mark the event.

“ Unworthy ! Sibyl ; unworthy ! good heavens ! I wish that you could see her, she is

the purest, sweetest woman that ever lived. Oh, if only you could know her, if she could be with you sometimes, and have you for a friend, I think I should be content. Lady Standish, I believe you capable of anything that kindness and sympathy can accomplish—if you would but find her, and comfort her, for she is almost alone in the world!

“But my dear Gerald,” said Lady Standish, perfectly astounded at the impassioned vehemence of this usually calm, easy-going man of the world, “I don’t understand anything of all this; you must tell me calmly all about it, and what you expect me to do.”

They had walked quite away from the illuminated paths, away from all the noise and glare, to an open part of the garden, where all was still, save for the distant sound of the music; they passed by a low stone parapet, and there, in the soft pale light

of the moon, which shone full upon them, Gerald Erne told his tale of love.

It was a strange romance for the fashionable man of the world to be pouring into the ears of a fashionable lady of the nineteenth century, and perhaps if any curious gaze followed them it misconstrued the whole scene ; but in the solemnity of that still hour all conventional disguises of the simple man and woman fell away ; for once worldly care for appearances was set at nought. Helen Standish, leaning against the balustrade and gazing up at the glorious moon, listened to this outpouring of honest manly love with a true woman's sympathy. When he ceased they neither of them spoke for some time ; the hour, the scene, the circumstances of its being their parting interview, the hopelessness, as it seemed, of this ill-fated and unsuitable attachment, were all calculated to work upon the feelings. At last she put out her

hand to him, saying, “I will do what I can ; I may not be successful, but if I find her, and,” with a sad smile, “if she is what you think, I will be her friend.”

“God bless you, dear friend,” and he raised her hand to his lips. “I shall be a braver and a better man now, for I shall have something to hope for, something to live for.” Then drawing her arm within his own, they slowly retraced their steps.

Servants were flitting about near the tent with ices and refreshments ; couples parading up and down, now and then talking in subdued tones, and unconscious of whom they passed ; from others snatches of merry conversation reached them as they moved on—one noisy group of men were laughing immoderately. They proved to be the young officers of the 27th ; while as Phill Crofts walked away sounds died in the distance of—“’pon my soul—devilish bore—fine gal—but

shocking bad taste not to know when she finds a good-looking fellah—confoundedly polite—no feeling 'pon my soul—half a mind to try another though—now I'm used to it—a—”

The joke, if it were one, had been successful. Poor Phill had been encouraged to propose to Miss Vernon, while the merry plotters laid in ambush to enjoy the fun, and then when they could no longer control their laughter, and at the critical moment when Isabel, perfectly astounded and yet half amused at Captain Croft's audacity, had given a very formal but decided answer, one of them came forward to “claim the honour of my dance, Miss Vernon,” and thus extricated her from an unpleasant position.

“I wonder how Hetty has been getting on,” said Lady Standish; “oh, there she is.” It was Hetty’s first ball, but she had danced the whole night; for she had been introduced as a guest staying in the house,

and so she had no lack of partners ; the most constant one, however, was Major Swift : and though one of the very young country gentlemen quizzically asked her who that “venerable waltzer” was, and though Hetty scarcely knew whether to think it funny or not, she was in her heart rather proud of attentions paid her by a man of his age, who was also the best dancer in the room (which she herself was far from being), and she felt quite at home with him ; besides, Paget had not been near her, but had devoted himself the whole evening to strangers who knew neither the house guests nor the heroes of the night, apparently, and Hetty felt hurt and wrathful, and determined to flirt wherever it suited her.

The foolish child did not understand the good nature of Paget, who left the course clear for the officers to enjoy this short, last night with their friends. In the novelty of

her position, and the pleasure of being sought as a partner, she soon forgot her little grievance; besides, the Major had been especially kind and watchful that she should thoroughly enjoy herself; he introduced a number of men to her whom he called “Harry’s brother officers.” “Remember, if anyone asks you to dance whom you don’t like, say you are engaged—to me, I mean, Miss Domville.” “But suppose you are not there, I can’t go and hunt you up, exactly,” said Hetty, laughing.

“ Trust me to be there,” was the gallant reply.

They had tried their usual banter, but it had not been as brilliant and sharp as usual. Even pert, provoking Hetty, remembered that he had always been her champion when she needed one, and that he was going away. The little Major did not quite succeed in hiding the fact that he remembered

it too. Indeed, at the moment that Gerald and his companion caught sight of them I am afraid he was not trying to hide it at all. It was nearly twelve o'clock, the hour when the gong was to sound, and immediately after supper the officers were to slip away unperceived by any but those friends who had agreed to assemble on the steps in the front of the house where the drag was to be in waiting.

“You will give me something to keep in remembrance of you, Miss Domville: a glove to bear on the point of my lance, or a scarf to bind round my arm, like the knights of old.”

“Indeed, I am not going to spoil my first ball gloves by breaking the pair; what would mamma say to me? besides, I mean to keep them myself as relics of all the pleasure I have had to-night. And I don’t believe you *have* a lance, for you are a hussar, and Harry told me they don’t use

lances. Oh, Major Swift, how funny *you would* look with a lance, and with my red sash on—round your waist, mind, bow and all, not round your arm ; ” and the girl’s merry laugh rang again at the picture that she had conjured up. She was getting into one of her wild moods in her unreserve with her indulgent friend.

“ There,” she added, “ You may have a flower out of my bouquet if you like ; which will you have ? It is all I have to give, but it will fade, and get tired of you, almost as soon as I should have done if Lady Standish had carried out her threat of the little breakfast tables for two, you know.”

The light was dim and pale. She did not see how white the man’s face was, nor the expression of pain that passed over it. In her youth and inexperience she did not hear the ring of pathos in his voice as he strove to answer her lightly :

“Oh, never mind that, it will last as long as your recollection of me, I dare say, and when it is faded, why, you know, I can amuse myself by watching it float on the top of a wave,” then, suddenly lowering his voice almost to a whisper, “Give me that sprig of myrtle from the front of your gown. Be kind to me to-night and give it to me yourself.”

At that moment the gong began to sound; the girl looked up suddenly at her companion, searchingly for a moment. She said not a word more, but detached the myrtle and gave it as she was asked. She probably did not notice that she had loosened a little red bow from the trimming of her dress, and that it disappeared also. Lady Standish and Captain Erne joined them, and they all went on together.

In a few minutes the whole scene was changed. The supper tent was filled, and the buzz of conversation drowned the

sounds of the band long before they had played their last bar.

At one distant table our set of friends, with some of the nicest and prettiest women of the evening, had successfully accomplished their plan of sitting all together, and if any of them had grave thoughts that were not in harmony with the gaiety of the hour, these well-trained citizens of the world took care that their table should not be the least cheerful one in that lively scene, and that no want of hilarity should mar the merriment of the gathering; still, a close observer might have noticed that now and then, as two friends might raise the glasses to their lips, their eyes would meet one another's, and an almost imperceptible but meaning glance convey the good wishes from heart to heart.

One hour later, and the same select party stood on the broad flight of stone steps at

the entrance of the house, before which the drag, with its four greys, was drawn up, and the servants mutely stood by, holding great coats and wrappers. Not many words were spoken then; there were a few feeble attempts at sprightliness, but for the most part all merriment had died out with the lights they had quitted. It was felt to be a parting—aye, it might be for ever, some remembered. Though there were amongst them those who were mere acquaintances, or but the partners of the evening, there were others who claimed the bond of friendship, and all more or less felt the solemnity of the hour.

It must have been a picture that would not readily be effaced from the minds of those who were leaving. There, standing at the portal of his own mansion, the courteous old Baronet, the hospitable host, and the grand but ever kind and sympathizing Lady Standish, surrounded by many who

have figured in this history, and by fair women wrapped lightly with their white draperies over their evening toilettes. Isabel, more lovely than ever in the moonlight, a perfect haze of tulle and marabouts, with her clear brown eyes shining like stars out of a cloud; the fluttering Hetty, in her red ribbons, silent and subdued now. Harry, by his own desire, was going with them to-night to join his regiment for the first time, though he would be left behind at the dépôt for a time. He stood shyly by Isabel's side, without uttering a word. Heartily, but mostly in silence, were exchanged the lingering grasps of hands that night—hands that might never clasp one another again; a few moments—the servants came forward, the wrappers were taken from them—all were in their places. Some one, no one ever knew who, said “drive on;” all hats were off; the ladies waved their lace hand-

kerchiefs, their jewels sparkled in the moon-light. As Paget ran a few yards by the side of the carriage for a last word, a last grasp of Gerald's hand, he fancied he saw the Major gravely put something to his lips ; a moment more—all hats were held aloft—a bend in the drive—they were gone ! How many ever returned ? Alas, alas, was there not one of those left standing there whose instinct could forecast the time, not even distant, when once more the calm pitying face of a moon would look down upon the gallant 27th, and see it, not as now, but lying stiff and stark in a distant valley of Death ?

* * * * *

The dance went on. When was private sorrow or anxiety ever allowed to interfere with the conventional customs or pleasures of society ? Not in the 19th century, at all events.

For the remainder of the night Paget devoted himself assiduously to those particular

friends whom he thought might have felt a sense of loss. He had glanced anxiously at Isabel, wondering how she would be affected—wondering what had passed between her and Gerald: whether she would quietly retire to her room now; but no, there she remained, looking just as she had done all the evening, a shade paler perhaps; but so were many there (for the night was wearing on)—apparently nothing had happened to disturb the calm, gracious, measured manner that seemed one of her characteristics. He fancied that in Lady Standish's face, despite her efforts to be lively, there was a shade of feeling that had grown deeper since they had returned to the ball-room.

All things must come to an end, and so did this eventful night, with many exclamations at the great success of the best arranged and most brilliant *fête* of the season!

The next morning found a large party at

Standish, but many were the departures during the day—only a few guests lingered on a day or so longer to suit their convenience. Every morning the hall was filled with departing luggage, and by the end of the week, Isabel Vernon was the only guest left, for it was settled that she was to remain with Lady Standish, on a long quiet visit, while her mother spent a few weeks with some old relations.

Lady Standish had received a hurried note from Captain Erne, written in pencil on board the troöp ship, to report all well—his thanks, and trust in her, his dear kind friend. And then in fulfilment of her promise, on the very first morning that she had at her disposal, Lady Standish ordered her pony-carriage, telling Isabel that she was going out on business, and, taking with her a mere boy groom, she drove into Windsor and made enquiries at the different hotels for

a Miss Blake. She was beginning to despair of success, when she bethought herself of the post-office. The same unsatisfactory answer; poor Sibyl had no correspondent. She had driven on a few paces slowly, pondering what she could do next. She was as far off as ever, when she suddenly remembered that it was the old doctor whom she should enquire for—but, his name! She had not the smallest recollection of it; she was not even aware whether Gerald Erne had mentioned it; there would now be no means of communicating with him for many weeks. Disappointed and discouraged, she turned the pony's head homewards; she must pause and consider what to do next.

The following day was Sunday. She had agreed with Isabel to go to service at St. George's Chapel. In the middle of the chanting, Isabel touched her and whispered, “Look down the church and close by the door,

there is the most lovely face I ever saw—a girl in deep mourning, next to an old gentleman.” Lady Standish looked, and found it difficult to withdraw her eyes. Again and again as the sermon proceeded, both she and Isabel found themselves watching this unknown beauty, and they soon perceived that they were not singular in their admiration; but the object of it seemed quite unconscious that she was being gazed at; if she had been alone she could not have been more at her ease. It was a wonderfully beautiful face, Lady Standish thought; but oh, so sad now, in its pensiveness, so young, so noble, so resigned, and yet so full of feeling; and lovely and winning as was the face, it was not that only, but the grace and high bearing of this unknown beauty that satisfied the critical taste of the woman who watched her. Suddenly, as her eyes wandered to the deep mourning, to the old gentleman so like an

old doctor, the thought flashed across her, “Can it be her! if so, no wonder, poor Gerald.”

It was then near the close of the sermon; there was no further impression to be made by the preacher as far as Lady Standish was concerned, I fear. She felt eager to get by this girl, so near to her, and yet so completely separated as long as the service continued. It happened that just as the congregation rose, before the blessing was given, Sibyl looked in their direction; as her eyes fell upon Isabel, a look of pain, almost alarm, came into her face, and then she flushed crimson. Lady Standish saw it, but understood it not. The congregation knelt, the organ pealed forth, and presently the stream of people set towards the door to leave the church; but it was very crowded, and it took a long time. Lady Standish was hemmed in by those before her, and strove in vain to

make a speedy exit. When she came out from the porch she looked anxiously and in every direction for the figure in deep mourning and the old gentleman ; they were nowhere to be seen !

It was provoking, but she had received encouragement. She never doubted to herself whether she was right in her discovery. She could scarcely rest that day. At night she laid awake racking her mind to devise some way of prosecuting her enquiries, and when she fell asleep it was to dream over again the scene with Gerald Erne in the garden by moonlight ; from the beginning she heard the impassioned story again, and the self-reproaches that he had not had courage to make known his love ; and there in the dream, quite naturally, Dr. Martin's name seemed to be uttered, and when she awoke in the morning she wondered within herself that she had not known it before.

Again the pony-chaise came round, and the excited and hopeful lady started on her journey of discovery.

At the first and largest hotel in the town no such name as Dr. Martin's had been heard of. At the next the prompt answer was :

“ Yes, my lady ; certainly, my lady ; Dr. and Mrs. Martin, and a young lady in black, with her maid, also in mourning, have been staying here for nearly a month, but they have left this morning.”

END OF VOL. I.



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